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THE SPOILS OF THE STRONG

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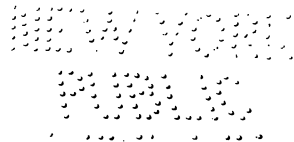
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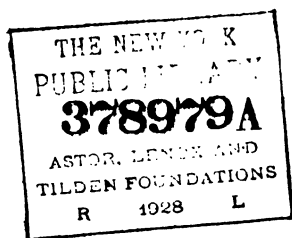
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BY
ELEANOR TALBOT KINKEAD
(Mrs. Thompson Short)
Author of "The Invisible Bond"
"The Courage of Blackburn Blair"

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

"The Spoils of the Strong" is the third book in the plan of a thought trilogy in which the three great fundamental relations of life are severally presented as the viewpoint from which the love theme is evolved. In "The Invisible Bond," the first of the series, emphasis is given to the marriage relation—the relation of man toward woman. The central thought is the idea of the sanctity of the marriage bond, leading up to a larger idea: the sanctity of the marriage relation, out of which alone, in the author's opinion, is to develop the solution of the problem of divorce. In "The Courage of Blackburn Blair," the emphasis is upon the fraternal relation—the relation of man toward humanity, the central thought here being the sacrifice of individual privilege for the sake of the good of the many. And it is the relation of the individual toward the divine—toward those mystic revelations that are the God-given things of the spirit—which is set forth in this, the conclusion of the sequence.

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PART I
AS ONE WHO AWAKES

CHAPTER I

EVELYN TYLER

As the train emerged from the shadowy gorge and plunged once more into the full splendor of the marvelous sunshine—the sunshine of western North Carolina—she withdrew her enchanted gaze from the car window and threw a quick glance in the direction of her fellow passengers, half fearing that the reiterated “beautiful—beautiful!” of her thoughts had found expression in actual speech.

But her brief survey of the Pullman was not wholly reassuring. At all events, several persons were looking a trifle curiously at her, and the rich color in her cheeks deepened, a characteristic unconsciousness of her own rather notable appearance making her unsuspecting of the real cause of their attention.

As one of three Kentucky sisters to whom a certain conspicuousness had attached on account of the possession of beauty of a somewhat distinguished order, Evelyn Tyler, nevertheless, had not, through admiration, developed into the type of woman, thus favored, who is prone to interpret every passing glance as an act of homage to herself; and there had been doubtless a salutary discipline in the verdict of the superficial observer, who almost invariably gave the palm to one or the other of the elder two.

In point of fact, her paramount claim to distinction lay not merely, as with them, in a rare correctness of

outline, not in a very gracious blending of warm brown tones, offset by gleaming eyes and teeth, nor even in that specific look of race which differentiates the woman of the finer order from the one that is merely lovely—in none of these things so much as in a sort of unabashed, passionate insistence upon the joy of life, which manifested itself under all her polish of bearing in the restless eagerness of her whole spirited, beautiful being: the determination to wrest from the sorrowful din and defeat and disaster of earthly existence the supreme of human happiness; and not only this, but a wild willingness to find it, everywhere, anywhere, provided only she should know the thing discovered to be really happiness, and not its clever, elusive, and far too alluring counterpart.

Little doubting that she had indeed spoken audibly, and somewhat disconcerted by the solecism, she was turning again to her window when her glance was caught and held by the figure of a man in the section opposite whose face was turned in such a manner that she saw merely the full, clean sweep of his striking and very powerful profile—a quite young man, strong of limb as well as of feature, tall, smooth-shaved, well-dressed, and plainly not of the South, as her practiced eye was quick to conclude through the testimony of various minor signs.

It was a personality at once arrestive and confounding—that of an enthusiast, surely, perhaps of a zealot, yet of one in whom the high qualities of intuition and imagination, of mentality and emotion, were so finely balanced that, in the complete absence of the dæmonic, one (believing this to be an essential element) might have hesitated to pronounce him a genius on account of his appearance of thorough sanity. However that might be, there was that in his aspect which stood for strength of some kind far out of the ordinary.

His light brown hair framed a brow of distinct intellectuality beneath which his eyes of a dark, peculiar bluish gray glowed with the fire and the passion and the pathos of the temperament, richly endowed, which, born to create, is also born to suffer. But it was withal a face of remarkable repose and dignity for so young a man, who, apparently, was not more than twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age, and it betokened a singleness of purpose with which had been brought into thorough harmony an evident buoyancy and ardor of inclination—a result that not infrequently led the bewildered on-looker, noting his splendid physical development, finally to mistake him for one no more important than the ordinary young college athlete.

Evelyn Tyler did not fall into that error. Her acuteness of insight, reënforced by a direct reminiscent suggestion, riveted her eyes upon the young man's quiet figure and averted face with almost instant surmise as to who and what he was.

The idea both startled and entertained her. Still she was by no means sure. She moved a trifle sidewise in her seat and sat furtively studying him in his isolation, half-amused and half-annoyed at the inward commotion his presence had aroused in her.

Perhaps there was something in her silent inquiry powerful enough to penetrate his abstraction. At all events, he turned suddenly and sat erect—just as if roused by a touch or the sound of a voice. His glance hesitated for the briefest possible space, traversed the car with the rapidity of lightning, and then, before she could move or look away, intercepted her own on the point of flight. Their eyes met in a sense of shock that was positively painful.

For an instant his gaze held hers while he noted every

lineament of the lovely face with a primitive directness, a shy reverence mingled with its thorough masculinity, that seemed to lift the proceeding completely out of the pale of modern conventionality, and to give to it a sort of classic dignity. And in that flash of mutual illumination, they were not two persons distinctly separate by the social restriction that forbids under such conditions a strange young man to speak to a strange young woman without the formalities of introduction, but beings temporarily so far removed from all ordinary limitation as to be independent of its authority, while each face searched the other, making its dumb salute, and powerfully impelled thereto by the ancient privilege which warrants the soul, however bound, to recognize those of its own order.

She was the first to relieve the situation of its tension, and she did it with the pride and ease of the accomplished woman of the world betrayed by self-forgetfulness into a momentary indiscretion. Without the smallest haste, and quite as if she were without further consciousness of his presence, her eyes traveled the length of the car, slowly returned, and then fell upon a book on the seat beside her, which she opened and began to read with an apparent interest that was, however, strangely belied by her failure to turn a page.

But presently, as the train slowed into a station, she knew, without the assurance from so much as the flicker of an eyelash, that he had risen and left the car. And in the sense of blankness that followed upon the thought that his identity, only partially guessed, would perhaps always remain in uncertainty, she realized all at once that her heart was beating quickly and with an acuteness of regret against which the fine edge of her disdain vainly strove.

However, his departure was not final, she presently saw, as was evidenced by certain of his belongings—his bag, his paper, his magazine—left behind. The latter lay half-open on the seat he had just vacated, and an empty envelope, thrust carelessly between the leaves, marked the place where he had been reading. The envelope protruded only an inch or two, but as the wind tossed the fluttering page now and then the superscription was plainly visible.

An impulse seized her; and without an instant's hesitation she acted upon it with a promptness in decision which was essentially her own, and which in all ages has been a characteristic of the type to which she belonged—the type whose surest strength lies in that swift resoluteness of conviction that leads to speedy execution. As the negro porter hurried past, mumbling, "Yo' station nex', miss," she rose, and with the appearance of wishing to read the name of the station they were just leaving, slipped quietly across the aisle and into the seat opposite.

She stood an instant, as if looking down upon the long frame building that stretched the length of the platform. But she saw neither platform nor building. A light as from some secret reflection had leaped into her eyes, and there was a sudden rush of crimson to her brow. For with one sweeping, comprehensive glance she had seen the address on the envelope and had read, "Geoffrey Bay—" to which she had exultantly supplied the remaining letters of a name that for the past ten months or more had held a place in her thoughts at once exalted and romantic and unique.

Ten minutes later, her radiance of aspect almost dazzling the big, good-natured conductor into a forgetfulness of duty as she descended upon him followed by the

negro porter, she stepped from the train and into the presence of a queer little old lady in a black gown and veil, who, with outstretched hand and a somewhat watchful and suspicious eye, came forward decorously to receive her.

CHAPTER II

THE HALF-GODS GO

“ . . . CHILD, who is it that you look like?”

The tone was low but sharply vibrant, and the little old lady had caught herself up in the middle of a sentence with a start, the usual frozen calm of her manner being strangely altered as she made the abrupt inquiry.

It was at breakfast the following morning, and she suddenly dropped the ~~sugar~~ tongs and put on her gold-rimmed eye-glasses as if perceiving her guest for the first time, while she peered curiously, and with evident trepidation, across the table at the tall and elegant figure opposite—charming in white lawn, and in a certain fresh and burnished appearance that cheerfully defied the brilliant North Carolina sunlight streaming in through the many windows.

Under the piercing scrutiny of a pair of particularly shrewd and observant black eyes Evelyn winced and drew in her breath quickly. For a moment her lashes were downcast; and when she looked up it was with a smile whose radiance was an attempted evasion, just as her reply was a subterfuge.

“No one very dreadful, Aunt Harriet, I hope.” Then she added, with gay, deliberate provocation, “I am sure you can’t mean either of my sisters, Julia and Ethel; they are both so much prettier than I.”

At mention of these two young women of unfortunate

memory, who had failed sadly to win her approval, the little old lady's face hardened instantly.

She helped herself, after Evelyn, to another waffle. "Humph! prettier, are they?" she demanded, dryly. "I should say that the advantage was all the other way. However, it doesn't matter. In *my* day," and the tone grew somewhat painfully suggestive, "in *my* day a young woman realized that there were a few other things in life worthy of attempt and accomplishment besides smirking before a mirror and setting one's cap to catch a wealthy husband. It was always a source of much gratification to both of my parents that my younger sister and I—there were three of us, my dear, just as in your case—were spared the fatal gift of beauty."

The girl sat studying the small, still face with sly amusement, observing the smoothness of the carefully tended complexion, still but little furrowed after five and seventy years, the healthful sheen upon the white, well-kept hair, which grew back in soft abundance from the low brow, the erectness and pride of the fragile form, the thought and nicety displayed in the somber gown.

She leaned forward with a spontaneous movement that was a distinct appeal to friendliness. "But, Aunt Harriet, you must have been, you *still* are, lovely!" she exclaimed, softly, her face breaking into a swift, beautiful smile that seemed to immerse the recipient in a sudden bath of sunshine.

Her great-aunt straightened herself to the full number of her four feet and eleven inches, and a faint and girlish pink showed in her cheeks. She bowed gravely.

"Your Uncle Chisholm held that opinion, my dear, and his approval was all that I ever desired."

Evelyn's face suddenly grew sweet and wondering.

Under the power of an illuminating thought that had kindled her sympathy, all at once the element of grotesqueness which had been particularly dwelt upon in the descriptions that had been given her of her eccentric relative seemed to give way to dignity; and in this perennial romance of more than half a century, she found herself coming under the fascination of something rare and quaintly touching, notwithstanding the singularities of a type in which her sisters had seen only something to amuse.

Widowed at twenty-one! she reflected. And through all the years a fierce loyalty to a memory!—a loyalty that could brook with no sort of patience anything that should seem to imply that she was still not as set apart by sorrow as in the first days of her bereavement.

An unexpected flashlight had been turned upon the situation, and Evelyn saw the blunder that her sisters had made, and knew that it was due far more to their failure to treat the grief of their great-aunt as a recent thing, than to their attempt to convert her solemn old home in the heart of the Blue Ridge, set back behind dense groves of oak and pine, into a modern, frivolous abode.

But the searching black eyes were once more fixed upon her, and Evelyn encountered them just in time to catch their full import, and to hear a smothered, "Ah—ah!" as the little old lady turned away with evident agitation.

Some recurrent resemblance on the girl's face, haunting, insistent—or was it a note in her laughter that had lingered, the quality of wildness and sweetness strangely blended?—had roused the elder woman profoundly, and brought her back, with a repeated start of dismay, to

her previous hurried inquiry. Only this time there was little uncertainty, and in her low ejaculation there were both regret and protest.

"Who is it that you are like?" she demanded, almost sternly.

Evelyn paled a little, and she spoke quickly.

"You are thinking," she said, breathlessly, "you are thinking—"

"I am thinking of my sister, your great-aunt Evelyn, who died at the age of twenty-six."

"At just my age," murmured Evelyn, softly.

"She married a Russian nobleman, a man of terrible passions and cruel temper. Her life was brilliant, and varied, and very unhappy. Her death was—tragic."

"Yes, I know. He killed her. There had been a former lover who had died, and she couldn't forget, and one day in a fit of jealous rage he killed her."

The old lady's face had grown deathly white, but her expression was a mask to her inmost feelings. Pride of race, the long habit of reticence, which made it difficult for her to discuss even with one of her own blood the dark chapter in their family history, which had just been touched upon, held her silent for an instant. Then she said briefly and with evident unwillingness to pursue the subject further:

"She was drowned. Beyond that we knew nothing—with certainty."

Evelyn reached forth a quick, imploring hand, and then withdrew it instantly. Her lips were parted, and there was a look of pleading in her eyes.

"I am so sorry; I hoped you would not see the likeness, Aunt Harriet," she said, "both for your sake, and—and for my own. It has often made me very miserable. There is an ivory of her at home, done by a French artist

with exquisite skill. Most persons mistake it for a portrait of myself. And just because I am so strangely, so startlingly like her, I can't help at times torturing myself with the thought that I am to have something—something like her fate. From a child almost it has troubled me. It is foolish, of course, and yet—”

She broke off all at once and dropped her eyes, conscious that she was being studied with a new and peculiar interest. But before Mrs. Chisholm could reply, the girl looked up again with a swift defiance in her cool challenge of the gaze bent upon her; and it was as if she were summoning to her aid all the energy, and all the philosophy, and all the inherent resoluteness of her own radiant being, in order that she might ward off and combat some secret prophecy of evil. She began to speak quickly, the words coming in a rush of feeling, her cheeks flushed.

“I know—I know that my life need not be at all like hers,” she protested, “unless I am tempted as she was tempted, unless I do the thing she did—which was simply a deliberate disloyalty to her better self. Her sorrow, terrible and pitiful as it was, was really of her own making. Can't you see—can't you see that it was like that? If only she had been true to the man she loved—true as you have been—everything would have been different with her. Her unhappiness—I have thought of it so many, many times—was only a consequence of her own act, a law working to its own logical end; and the end of all such disregard of one's finer nature, where there is a finer nature, is invariably death—a spiritual death, I mean.

“In her case, poor dear, it was even more, if there is any more, and I can hardly bear to think of it. After all the long years the miniature makes her seem so real, so alive—and, oh, so capable of the very fullness of joy!

One *wishes* that she might have had it. But could it have been different with her from what it was, after the choice she made? And surely," once more the voice became tremulous and beseeching, "surely you do believe that one may escape her doom, and that there is happiness in life for those who are trying to hold on to the things of the spirit—for the one who is willing to let the half-gods go?"

"Have *you* let them go?"

The question was so surprisingly brusque, and so distinctly to the point that Evelyn was startled into a momentary confusion. Then, with a characteristic transition of emotion, and with that speedy recovery of herself which enables the woman of social gifts tactfully to smooth over an unexpected awkwardness, she broke into a low laughter and responded lightly.

"I am afraid you will think I make large claims for myself, Aunt Harriet," she said, "particularly, if you mistook me for a Philistine—which I half suspect you did. But really, it is not quite so bad as that—indeed, it is not. The truth is," she paused a trifle helplessly and grew serious, "the truth is, I would never have asked you to let me come here, if I had not—if I had not been sure that the quiet time I should have in this beautiful place would seem a blessed exchange for the cheap and tawdry existence I have been living.

"I am tired, tired to death of it all. For a while I loved it. I went to all sorts of things. I was caught up and swept on in a whirl of delightful excitement, and I lived in a little temple all my own where roses and incense were offered daily. I even"—she darted a sparkling, audacious glance into the face opposite—"I even flirted once in a while—outrageously!"

She paused an instant, as if waiting for this announce-

ment to have full effect; and in her daring mention of the worst she could think of to tell of herself there was coupled a genuine impulse of confession with a mischievous desire to shock. Her face was a ripple of irrepressible mirth.

But Mrs. Chisholm, somewhat to her surprise, showed no disposition to pronounce judgment. Nor was she, apparently, greatly scandalized. Her still countenance maintained its usual callous calm, and save for a quick gleam in the dark eyes, transient, misleading, one might have questioned that she had even heard.

Evelyn hesitated an instant, and then with a slight change of base, went on again with airy persiflage, still struggling with her laughter, her willful assumption of a sort of secret sympathy and good fellowship between her great-aunt and herself producing in its efforts at *camaraderie* a mental picture that was almost too much for her sense of humor.

"But I was rather too transparent to be altogether successful in the rôle of a trifier in love, and after a while it ceased to interest me to play the part. No one was ever a little bit deceived. Then other things—so many things—began to pall upon me. Until now it has all grown commonplace and vapid, with nothing to offer that I care for, and I—I scarcely know where to turn to find the thing I really do want. And yet"—her warm contralto suddenly dropped and grew wistful, charged with deep cadences of passionate feeling—"I still believe that it is here to be found—that somewhere—somewhere on the earth there is such a thing as happiness—happiness on such a big and splendid scale as would put to shame the poor substitute which is the best the gay world has to offer. And recently—quite recently, it has occurred to me that if only one's house of life

were swept and garnished—if only the half-gods were driven forth—possibly, possibly the gods might arrive.”

Mrs. Chisholm smiled slyly, with the quiet wisdom of her years and her own native shrewdness.

“All of which simply means, my dear, that you have fallen in love, and with some one of superior quality.”

She readjusted her glasses, noting anew, and with a sort of hidden apprehension, the brilliant bloom and animation of the lovely face, the intense aliveness and underlying force of the supple form; and suddenly, as by some secret observation, the girl’s inner nature seemed to stand revealed to her, a shiver passed over her and her expression saddened. But Evelyn’s answer quite swept her off her feet.

“No, Aunt Harriet,” she asserted, coolly, “I don’t think I have fallen in love—but, oh, how I wish I had!”

Mrs. Chisholm drew herself up.

“Such things should come in their own good time. In my young days it was not thought seemly to discuss them,” she said, gravely.

“Oh, but you know you had no need to discuss them,” responded Evelyn, with soft, premeditated archness. “You were so charming that you could not escape being immediately sought and won, even if you had wanted to. But you see with me it is altogether different. I am a melancholy failure. The life that my sisters delight in has become unendurable to me, and I am trying, trying to readjust myself to the thought of a different one, without knowing just how to begin. It seemed a beautiful beginning to be allowed to come to you here, and that is why I thought it so particularly kind of you to receive me.”

“I trust you will find contentment, at least, here, my child.”

The words were uttered with a peculiar gentleness, and Evelyn looked up.

"I shall find more," she said, quickly. "I am going to find—happiness!"

There was a moment's pause.

"Wait until you have had a week of it, and then let me know whether you are still so grateful," remarked Mrs. Chisholm, dryly, but smiling, and evidently won. "In the meantime there isn't much that I can do for your amusement. I have, however, a few plans."

Evelyn stared, aghast, but the little old lady took not the smallest notice.

"This evening," she continued, "I am expecting a number of young persons to meet you at dinner. My husband's relatives, the Chisholms, are having a house party—some fifteen in all, I believe—with the addition of the young man who arrived yesterday. Mrs. Chisholm, of course, will preside, it being thoroughly understood in the community that I do not appear on such occasions. Others in the neighborhood will meet you in due time. I have secured an excellent saddle horse for you, and you can ride or drive as the fancy takes you. You must learn to entertain yourself. I daresay you will find it somewhat difficult. Loneliness is an art that few know how to accomplish successfully. Nevertheless, you are welcome to make the test and to remain as long as it pleases you here. And now, if you will think of something you would like to do, and will excuse me, I will go to my music. It is my custom to practice four or five hours each day."

Evelyn rose. She had scarcely seemed to hear the concluding sentences, and her face had suddenly crimsoned and then paled. She was thinking rapidly and her straight brows were knit in an effort at retrospection

that should bring before her every detail of the incident she was attempting in thought to reconstruct. She took a step forward.

"Wait a moment, Aunt Harriet, please," she said to the retreating figure near the doorway. "Do you—do you happen to know the name of the young man who arrived yesterday?"

Mrs. Chisholm turned. She threw a swift, interrogative glance into the brown eyes bent upon her with a curious mingling of wonder and insistence. For an instant she did not answer, and when she spoke the words came slowly and half reluctantly. But her features had altered strangely, and she looked away discreetly.

"His name is Baylor—Geoffrey Baylor," she replied, briefly, "and he is a distinguished young poet, I am told."

CHAPTER III

THE GODS ARRIVE

HALF an hour later, wearing a short sport skirt and linen blouse, a pair of stout walking boots, and a soft felt hat drawn down in boy's fashion upon her brown head, Evelyn stood upon the doorsteps of her great-aunt's residence as merry and irresponsible at the prospect of a long morning of unmolested freedom, as a country lad of twelve who has just made the charming discovery that his schoolhouse has burned to the ground.

She paused a moment, looking about her with shining eyes, and with prompt decision chose a path to the left of the house that led precipitously down through a dense grove of holly and hemlock and mountain laurel to a shadowy glen a hundred feet below, damp with ferns and mosses, where a little artificial lake, winding beneath steep, wooded banks, gleamed crystal-like in the dazzling August sunlight.

A foot-bridge spanned the lake, and crossing here, a moment afterward, with a curious commingling of seriousness and fun, a wondering expectation reflected in her eyes, which half ventured to believe that once more and for her the ancient myths of the forest would live again, she plunged into the near-by enchanted wood, whose nodding branches and myriad voices all night had seemed summoning her in her sleep.

She finally came out upon the main highway that winds through the picturesque settlement of Flat Rock—a com-

munity of country homes, like old English manor houses, set down in the midst of the wild beauty of the Blue Ridge mountains, and founded about a century ago by planters from the coast of South Carolina, who, traveling some three hundred miles by coach to escape the heat of the low country, here passed with their families and slaves in delightful comfort the happy months of the long summer time.

The antique dignity and distinction which still clung to the place in spite of all changes had interested Evelyn greatly, as sitting on the moonlit veranda the evening before her great-aunt Harriet had told her stories of that far-off ante-bellum existence, the memory of which still shed a halo over a more prosaic day—of its stateliness and its simplicity, its arrogant exclusiveness and its open-handed hospitality, its gentleness and its pride. Which last, it seemed, was not always left behind even at the doorway of St. John-in-the-Wilderness, the quaint little sanctuary in the grove, which had been designed originally as a private chapel belonging to the estate of an Englishman residing in their midst. Whither, it appeared, his spouse had been wont to repair in worldly pomp, preceded down the aisle by a most imposing sable functionary who carried her prayer book in a green baize bag, and followed by a huge and solemn-eyed negress who stood beside her mistress during the service wielding a large turkey-feather fan, the only pew except that intended for the family of the minister being occupied by the lady herself, while other worshipers sat upon hard, backless benches.

The little brick structure, covered with crumbling, buff-colored stucco, situated on a high embankment walled in on two sides with stone overgrown with English ivy, and surrounded by an old graveyard with box borders

and lots enclosed by iron fences and gateways, was not hard to find, and Evelyn, still bent on her tour of investigation, made her way to the place.

She had just paused beside a vine-shadowed tomb built up a foot and a half from the ground of blocks of stone, her eye caught by the simple carving of a cross on the marble slab that surmounted it, and was reading the inscription: "Sacred to the memory of Sarah, Countess de Choiseul, died—" when an acute consciousness that she was not alone in the churchyard made her raise her eyes and turn quickly.

She uttered a sharp, suppressed exclamation, hesitated, and then paused. As she did so the color flamed into her cheeks, and retreated suddenly. For the man moving an instant before in a desultory fashion down a distant box-bordered walk had caught sight of her, and with long, eager strides was coming straight toward her, determination expressed in every line of his stalwart form.

She looked around with a startled and troubled inquiry. "Ah, but not here—not here!" she kept saying to herself desperately as he approached, and a superstitious dread of she scarce knew what made it impossible for her to check the strange impulse of flight that irresistibly took possession of her. All at once she wheeled and moved rapidly in the direction of the church doorway, thus unconsciously lending herself to a symbolism of which she was only dimly aware, and which was in reality but an outward and visible witness to the soul's instinctive demand—the assurance of the victory of life over death.

But undeterred, the man kept right on, and his face was luminous. He walked with a sure and resolute tread, a certain joyous freedom of movement which, while suggesting the abandon and delight of youth, was yet quiet,

as if having its impetus in the deep things of the spirit that gave dignity and calm to his whole demeanor.

As he stood at last beside her a stillness took the place of her momentary loss of grasp, and with a complete return of her usual poise, she said, coolly—as if there had been in her action nothing in the least peculiar—though she did not raise her eyes:

“You are Geoffrey Baylor—and you wrote *Psyche*.”

He waited, silent, for a moment. And when he spoke his voice was low and tense and unguarded—as if impelled by a native directness of temperament—the emotion with which it was freighted being something that he scarcely strove to conceal.

“And you,” he answered, slowly, with his eyes still on her face, “you are Evelyn Tyler—who inspired it.”

She turned to him with a swift, impulsive movement, a sort of pleased surprise and wonderment rippling over her features like the play of sunlight on a rose. She did not speak, but she met his gaze as she pondered with an artlessness that seemed with a mere gesture to throw away all her usual defenses—those countless reserves and disguises by means of which a woman shields her inner nature from another’s eyes—and to respond to his frankness with an amazing simplicity. And for the moment she was not merely the polished woman of the world, but a being almost childlike in her sincerity and in her mute but profound tribute to his genius.

He grew all at once shy and boyish, on finding himself and his art thus thrust prominently into the foreground, and he looked away a trifle helplessly across the shadowy old churchyard, while a quick flush mounted quite up to the roots of his light brown hair.

Evelyn studied his profile, which was all she could see

of his face, a moment dubiously, and then a slow smile spread softly over her features. There was something strangely unexpected and appealing in his sudden overwhelming embarrassment.

"You wrote it—after—" she began, tentatively, and broke off abruptly.

"After I received your letter," he said, once more turning to her. "The idea had been in my mind for a long time—the thought of using the old classic legend as a picturesque basis for a purely modern thought. But—until then—something of inspiration was lacking always—I could not quite touch the spring that would seem to open to me the secret and intricate workings of the delicate mechanism I hoped to reveal—in other words, a developed womanliness concealed under the pathos of primitive doubt. Your letter—"

She broke in with a little smothered cry. But her smile had gradually become roguish, and her ordinary manner had returned.

"Oh—but then they did teach me a little at college, after all!" she exclaimed, gayly, "my father to the contrary."

"They taught you a whole lot," he decided, promptly. "But it wasn't just that—the thought in it—the culture—not just that that I meant."

His expression was grave and a trifle hurt under her laughing refusal to accept his homage. But she took no notice. She reached down and gathered a handful of clover from the thick growth about the doorway, sorting the longer stems from the short ones with a careful nicety.

"I wrote to you under an enthusiasm—and at your dear father's command," she said, presently, rather slowly. "He talked to me so much, so much about you.

I had met him in New York again and again—at dinner, at the opera, in art galleries—everywhere—and our conversation was nearly always of you. I never expected to know you actually—our ways seemed to be so far apart, and I knew that you were to be abroad for a long, long time. I think that but for all that I should not have written, and it never occurred to me to believe that you would really care for anything that I could say. Colonel Baylor—”

She paused a moment, and there seemed to rise before her the graceful outline of a unique and charming personality. As the young man's father, tall, blonde, distinguished, elegant always in attire as in bearing, member of a prominent brokerage firm in Wall Street, and a celebrated wit and raconteur, seemed for the instant to be looking down upon her with his quiet, penetrating eyes, she threw a furtive glance in the direction of the son, seeking in vain for the faintest resemblance between the two, yet finding a clue to much in the simple words of the father once wrung from him under the stress of a deep stirring of emotion and in the single reference he had ever permitted himself to the dead wife he mourned: “He is like—he is like his mother.”

“I think I never saw anything lovelier than his devotion to you,” she continued, softly, “his pride in you. And in the midst of so many distracting things, so many interests, the way everything, when your name is spoken, just suddenly drops from him like a coarse outer garment concealing some rare and splendid clothing beneath is something that always seemed so fine to me—so beautiful.”

At mention of his father, Geoffrey's face had been for an instant illuminated, and then his expression quickly changed. He was staring straight ahead of him, yet he

scarcely seemed to see the blue, distant range nor the turquoise sky above it.

"Then it was to humor an old man's whim merely that you wrote?" he said, at length, in a voice grown hard and strained.

Her face fairly sparkled with mirth.

"But I didn't please him," she cried, ruefully, and with a deprecating outward fling of the arms. "I told him something of what I had written, and he didn't like it in the least. It sounded altogether too didactic, too professional, he said. It reminded him too much of the critic, the literary arbiter—only he didn't say arbiter, he said donkey. He was afraid you wouldn't like me, and it seemed he wanted you to like me very much indeed. Besides, he was worrying about you over there in Europe, and he wanted so much that you should be instigated to come home."

"Which I was," said Geoffrey, with a distinct emphasis.

"Yes, so he told me later."

"I saw you at the opera on the evening of the day I reached New York. It was the first time—the only time until yesterday—since—"

His deliberate aim, well directed at her coolness, made good. An involuntary movement betrayed that she was off guard, and again a half-shy wonderment swept over her features. "Oh, did you!" she exclaimed. "But since?—When did you—where did you—?"

She paused in confusion, and he shook his head, denying her, firmly. When he spoke once more there was a new ring in his voice that transformed him strangely—the note of strength, of decision, that had speedily replaced the restive moodiness of an instant before. He spoke quietly, not hastily, as if in giving expression to his thoughts he was merely uttering a world-old truth

with which she must long have been familiar; and he passed his hand over his brow a trifle wearily before he turned and looked her straight in the eyes.

"You had my letter," he said, simply. "You knew that I intended to see you the first possible moment."

She smiled. "But you didn't say anything like that in the letter."

"I didn't quite dare—but you knew it all the same. You knew it. I was on my way to your box with a friend that night. I had just one instant's glimpse of you—white and glittering against the dark red background—and then a telegram was handed to me from my father, who was ill at our country place on the Hudson. I had to leave immediately."

She was sitting in the doorway of the old church, her elbows on her knees and her chin resting in both hands, and she threw him, on the step below, a merry, downward glance that ignored his seriousness.

"I think if I had ever once seen you my memory would have been more flattering," she declared. "But I had only portraits in magazines and newspapers to guide me. And yet—yesterday—on the train—I was almost positive from the first." She looked quickly away. "Had you never a suspicion?"

"Shall I tell you?" he asked. And then, without waiting for permission, he said, gravely, "I was not sure. You had grown older, more beautiful, more thoughtful. Something had happened to you, and you were changed. I was torn with uncertainty and conflicting doubt. But through it all there was only one thought, one desire; and I never longed for anything on earth so much as that it might be you."

"But if it had been another person altogether?"

She put the question quickly, and she had a long time

in which to study his features before he answered her. His reply, brief, almost curt in its conciseness, pointed a strange contrast of tone and meaning.

"Then the woman who wrote me that letter would still be on her throne," he said, with calm, matter-of-fact dismissal of the subject.

Evelyn's expression, which he little doubted would flash back at him in the airily mutinous, defensive fashion with which she had steadfastly safeguarded herself against his fervor, to his surprise reflected a sweetness and gravity that would have swept him completely off his feet but for her thorough coolness. She was looking with steady gaze in the direction of the lovely view spread out before her, and but for a slight deepening of the color in her cheeks one might have thought she had not heard, or was even unconscious of his very presence.

In truth, her thoughts were traveling slowly backward over many months of excitement and change and ennui to a distant day—a day when as by the merest accident, it seemed, a slender little volume of verse by an unknown writer had drifted into her hands. Her intensely emotional temperament, only partially schooled to obedience by the discipline of thought and experience, and as yet unaroused on the tenderer side of her being, had been profoundly appealed to by the restrained passion, the deep and powerful and elemental feeling that glowed in the somewhat over-polished verses of the young poet like a flame seen through a bit of rare and delicate porcelain.

The personal aspect of the situation that had forced itself upon her attention as a distinctly later development had been something at the outset that she had not been alive to in the remotest degree—owing mainly to the fact of an instinctive pride that seemed to hold her securely aloof from everything that should savor of the

attitude of the usual sentimental feminine adorer of masculine genius. And it was due to one of the rash, unselfish impulses which frequently swept her on to unconsidered action, entangling her in complications which taxed her ready wit to the limit, that she had sent him at his father's request the lengthy dissertation referred to.

His reply, simple, direct, brief, and above all as boldly individual, notwithstanding its tone of thorough high-breeding, as her letter was formal and abstract, brought her to a startled and vivid consciousness of a state of things that all at once revealed itself as not without its awkwardness.

But she was too safely panoplied with reserves not to be speedily at her ease, after that first involuntary and most surprising lapse; and her ready woman's skill veering away from the personal steered at once in the direction of his art.

She met his eyes quite frankly. "I had been making a special study of Ibsen when I wrote," she said—"Ibsen steeped in the lore of medievalism and all the impassioned action of the old Volsunga Sagas; and it seemed a strange contrast to turn from his pessimistic, that is, realistic, yet romantic, point of view, his perpetual conflict of sense at war with soul, to your stalwart twentieth century conception of life."

The tone was more tentative than flattering—a distinct challenge—and he turned his face toward her, at once thoughtful, yet lit with a sudden fire.

"I believe that the struggle of art through the ages has been toward a representation of the ideal. For the ideal is simply an effort to express the Divine through the human," he replied, quickly and positively, with the firm conviction of a man who has thoroughly formulated his ideas and is ready to stand for them. "The ultimate

value of any writer must rest upon the soundness as well as upon the beauty of the truth he utters—just that.”

“How splendidly—how splendidly,” she exclaimed, softly, “you have caught the new awakening spirit! It breathes like a living thing in every line you write. And how glorious to be a poet—an interpreter—in a century that does not moan for death but clamors for life—experience! And by life—that was the supreme message your poems brought to me—you mean the experience that is given the soldier—not merely the physical but the spiritual warrior—who is granted to be in the forefront of the battle, to be wounded, to struggle on, to die even for the sake of the cause that has enlisted him. It is—it is magnificent!”

He bowed his head, and in the utter simplicity of the action there was that which seemed not only an acknowledgment but a renewal of consecration. His face paled.

“In other words, it means service, begun here and stretching into eternity, foreshadowing immortal service—the idea of which is as old as the Christian era.”

“And service?” she breathed, between her parted lips, her face also becoming suddenly white and strained.

“Service is—suffering, the law of spiritual growth. Out of this idea, or rather, as its source, stands the idea of unity, which is the vital idea the new century is to fulfill.”

Her eyes, glowing with a sense of exaltation were still riveted upon him, and it was as if he had all at once appeared to her as the very exponent in human form of the dawning of the new day he had bespoke—a day that seemed to call to him in all its vigor, and bid him with sound soul and virile body bare his breast to the sun and the wind of life.

Suddenly she rose, half resisting, half yielding to the

tumultuous sweep of emotion which his own deep feeling, more implied in voice and manner than in actual words, had aroused in her; and with a sense of helplessness half poignant, half sweet, she realized that the intimate revelation he had just given would not admit of being treated impersonally like the splendid achievement and hope of one afar off from her own sphere of existence. Henceforth, between them there must be always the remembrance of things not only spoken but unsaid that had established a relationship impossible to ignore. Again, as in that flash of mutual recognition of the day before, they had stood for an instant on the height where conventions dwindle before the divine light of sympathy and understanding as a sickly plant droops and withers under a scorching noonday sun.

Through the dim, beautiful old churchyard, breathing its pungent odor of box and pine, and its sad, sweet memories, down the steep hillside and on out into the main road, they walked absorbed and silent, yet each acutely alive in every nerve and fiber to the other's presence. But at the entrance to Mrs. Chisholm's domain, Evelyn paused and threw him one of her swift, flashing smiles; and once more she was the somewhat mocking and difficult and enigmatical being with whom most persons had to deal who attempted to look beyond a particularly dazzling and mystifying exterior to the more complex inner nature which she religiously guarded.

"Here our ways part," she said, gayly and coolly. "If I should ask you to come in it would most likely involve me in explanations with my aunt which would too severely tax my powers of evasion. And you"—her face bubbled over with whimsical humor—"you would never be able to account for yourself to her satisfaction, I am

sure. But you are to be presented to me with all necessary formalities this evening, you know."

He felt the change in her instantly, and he stood boyishly abashed. A moment before she had seemed so near, so manifest. Now a veil had dropped; and perhaps there was something in his expression that made her hold out her hand. But as he grasped it warmly and firmly in his, she withdrew it instantly, and with only a brief nod and smile she turned and moved quickly up the long avenue.

He stood motionless just where she had left him, his eyes fixed with a stricken look upon her retreating figure as it darted in and out under the dark evergreens of the winding road, the sunlight flashing on her white blouse and on her bronze hair.

His face was white and set. But suddenly his features relaxed their tension, and a warm glow inspired by his secret memories of her face when she first lifted it to him on the church steps in all its surprised loveliness electrified his whole aspect.

As he thought of it, of the peculiar quality of her beauty, its element of wildness and strangeness, its hint of things obscure and tragical coupled with a marvelous kinship with joy, he found himself—in the intimation she gave of tremendous powers of will joined to passion, of swiftness and sureness of action, of tenderness deep and unimagined—linking her in his thoughts with certain marked women of the past set apart, as it seemed, by destiny, whose sweet and piercing beauty had sunk like a sword of flame into the anguished hearts of men.

Was Deirdrê, he asked himself with trembling lips, was Deirdrê, the beloved, the beautiful, more beautiful than she? Was Iseult? Was Francesca? But these

—all these—had walked hand in hand with Sorrow or Despair.

And then his mind, toiling with the thought which had been aroused in him, questioned further. Could it be that there is some inherent quality in mysterious beauty that is the source of its destruction? Back into the realms of history he wandered and brought up case after case of misfortune and perhaps of tragedy in the life of those on whom was laid the gift of wild and poetic beauty. Could it be that loveliness for which the possessor is in no sense responsible infolds in its heart the seeds of death? And could it also be that in the Courts of Heaven a doom is marked out for a human being and must inevitably be fulfilled? No—no! When he put it in this bald way he could not assent, and with vehement denial he drove the idea from him.

She was lost to him before he turned and moved slowly down the road. Then, still in a deep abstraction, his young face reflecting the white heat of his mood, his thought formulated the steadfastness of his resolve.

“It will not be an easy thing to win her,” he said to himself with conviction born of an agonizing doubt, “but I”—and once more he set his teeth hard—“but I will win her, all the same!”

CHAPTER IV

AN ORCHID

CONTRARY to all precedent or anticipation, on the evening of the same day, Mrs. Chisholm, wearing her black satin and old lace with a fine dignity, appeared in the drawing-room to receive her guests, thus assuming the duties of hostess of such an occasion for the first time in more than half a century.

A late message, telling of illness to the lady who had kindly consented to preside, and the somewhat exaggerated fear she felt of Evelyn's consequent discomfiture—not yet knowing fully the scope of that young woman's facility—had, it is true, brought her to a sense of responsibility. But the real cause of the startling procedure lay still deeper. And it was with a faint color and a peculiar light in her eyes that she turned to look upon the tall figure in white silk and pearls, who, coming from an inner apartment, advanced leisurely down the length of the long drawing-room just as their guests began to arrive, a merry wonderment playing hide-and-seek over all her features. Mrs. Chisholm's manner became elegantly formal.

"I wish you to go in to dinner with my great-nephew, Arthur Chisholm, my dear," she said, ignoring Evelyn's astonishment and deigning no explanation of her presence. "I myself have selected young Mr. Baylor, out of deference to his distinction," she added, as a laughing

crowd of young people entered the hall and filed gayly up the stairway. "I hope he will know how to make himself agreeable to an old woman, and not be disappointed when he discovers that I have never read a line of his poetry. I daresay it is poor enough, but he, doubtless, expects to be praised for it. Ah—!"

She broke off suddenly and took a step or two forward with the stateliness of one dancing the minuet, as there advanced to meet her a short, rather heavily built, but boyish-looking young fellow who grasped her warmly by both hands. "Actually you, Aunt Harriet!" he exclaimed, his droll blonde face reflecting his amazement.

But once more Mrs. Chisholm waived aside the personal, introducing young Chisholm to Evelyn in her best manner, and establishing him on her left, where he was commanded to remain until all the members of his house-party which, it appeared, included persons from many parts of the country, were duly made known to her, and then by her presented to Evelyn.

But it was not until Geoffrey Baylor, who was the last to enter the room, came forward, following upon the heels of two vivacious young women from New Orleans in picturesque costumes of flowered organdie, that her expression altered to something a trifle shrewd and calculating, her gaze traveling alertly on from the pretty, dark-haired girls to the tall young man in their wake. And as she witnessed the meeting between him and Evelyn, veiled, it is true, and far too adroitly managed to suggest anything to one less keenly observant than herself, a suspicion, already awakened, found instant confirmation, and throughout a long dinner of many courses formed the undercurrent of thought in her mind, while she proved the young man with as hard questions as

the Queen of Sheba propounded to King Solomon, and with far less satisfactory result.

In the meantime, Evelyn, seated at the opposite side of the huge round table softly lighted with rose-colored candles and gleaming with beautiful old silver and antique cut glass, was apparently enjoying thoroughly the society of young Mr. Chisholm, in spite of a slightly uncomfortable sense of mystification which his oddly jocose countenance had instantly produced in her, and of which he himself, with a chuckle of amusement, was entirely aware.

But he made no effort to enlighten the faint inquiry he surprised from time to time in her eyes as she glanced obliquely at him. And as with gay, good-natured banter he tossed the ball of conversation to her, she seized it adroitly, giving him her attention with an exclusiveness that seemed flattering to suggest that to her he was the one person the room contained—an attention that did not even wander, though her color heightened a bit, when presently his laughing eyes swept the table and rested upon the ill-matched couple opposite. He nodded briefly in the direction of his friend.

"I had expected to have the undivided honor of introducing the two celebrities," he said, with a bow of exaggerated deference, "but you observe that Aunt Harriet does not propose that I shall win distinction so easily. I am somewhat out of favor with her just now, you know."

"Are you? That is a dreadful state of things. What did you do?"

The young man hung his head. "I went to New York—and stayed there. She scorns me. She sees no reason at all why I should be a briefless barrister among Yankees when she is persuaded that I could starve quite as successfully at some place south of Mason and Dixon's Line."

Evelyn looked gravely into his round, well-fed countenance.

"I don't believe you could have done it more successfully anywhere," she said.

"But if I am to be regarded as a renegade," continued the young man, unabashed, "it is consoling to know that my friend Baylor across the way is in the same category. His father is a Virginian, you know, and his mother—wasn't she from your state? Seems to me I have heard that she was from Kentucky. Well, anyway, she was Southern born, and by the way, she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw in all my life—until to-night."

Evelyn laughed softly, accepting indifferently his florid tribute.

"You have known him—Mr. Baylor—a long time?" she asked, slowly studying her plate attentively as she put the question.

"Since the tender age of ten. They were down here one summer, the whole crew, that is, his father and mother and himself—for the benefit of Mrs. Baylor's health. Geof and I became fast friends. He challenged me on sight to a fist fight and won triumphantly, thereby making his calling and election sure, so far at least as my friendship was concerned."

"Were there any further amenities?"

Evelyn put the question casually, without so much as a glance in the direction of the subject of their discussion, but her red lips parted in a smile of evident interest, and her face was animated with a warm glow that gave a peculiar radiance to her whole aspect. Thus encouraged, Mr. Chisholm said gleefully,

"Any further amenities? Well, I should say there were a few after that, but the *coup de grâce* didn't come until the day he left, when he knocked the breath out of me,

and I was unconscious for something like three hours. It was all that was needed to buckle me to him with hooks of steel; so that when he became at Harvard the best football player of the class and a hero in athletics generally, there was a reminiscent pride in my yells for him that the other fellows could know nothing about. Of course we were only just beginning to suspect in those days that we would soon have excuse, and a very good one, for yelling for him on another line altogether."

Once more Evelyn was softly laughing, and there was something secret and enigmatical in her smile.

"Then you regard him as a living denial of the assumption that a poet, in order to be a genius, must be eccentric, morbid, supersensitive—I don't see how a good football player could be supersensitive, do you?—a shunner of the haunts of men? And if he is like that, what on earth do the reviewers mean by insisting upon their analogy of the 'hermit-thrush'?"

"'Hermit-thrush'—the dickens! It is all just a lot of rot because they don't know an earthly thing about him. He has spent a great deal of time abroad since he was through college. But now that he has come back he expects to establish himself permanently in New York, right in the heart of it, and he intends to draw his inspiration from association with his ordinary fellow-men. All that Shelley stood for as a man, Baylor is the very reverse of. And yet," he added with the generous enthusiasm with which youth sometimes opposes criticism, "I don't believe Shelley was a greater genius than he."

Evelyn was fingering the roses at her plate, and her face had become thoughtful. All at once she looked up, changing the subject abruptly.

"Could I—by any chance—have met you somewhere

before? You spoke of Harvard. And once during a Commencement week—”

“Oh, don’t mention it, please; you only danced with me six times.”

Evelyn looked him a moment wonderingly in the eyes, and suddenly her face flushed. An instant afterwards Mrs. Chisholm gave the signal for departure, and as the little old lady led the way from the dining-room, Evelyn turned quickly and almost breathlessly to the young man at her side.

“I remember—I do remember—” she began.

“I remember, I remember the house where I was born,” he quoted, gayly, interrupting her. “It was only six times—if it had been seven, I could not have forgiven you.”

He stepped aside to avoid walking on her gown, and as he did so the young girl who had been seated on his left began a lively conversation with him; and an instant afterward, in the midst of a general movement and readjustment, Evelyn was aware, though her lids were lowered, that Geoffrey Baylor was beside her, with his eyes on her face.

He did not speak, and she did not. And as they moved in silence through the long drawing-room in the direction of an open window, she was conscious almost to a sense of suffocation of the wild leaping of her heart against her low bodice, as it struggled desperately, defiantly, like some lovely, freeborn thing, still untamed, and refusing to believe itself captured, though feeling only too surely the strong bars of its cage. The tension of the moment, communicating itself instantly to each without so much as a word, and absorbing them wholly, had seemed all at once to surround them with an isolation as real and as complete as if they two alone were the sole beings in

some vast desert place, with only the stars overhead and the sound of the night wind in their ears.

Presently she raised her eyes, and shrinking a little from the look upon his white, still face, she began to speak, at first very quietly—as if attempting by a supreme effort to stay the onrushing sweep of emotion which was bearing down upon them like a torrent of flame—and then more quickly, finding with difficulty words that were but the spontaneous expression of a new and all-illuminating thought.

"It was in June," she said, slowly and dreamily, "during a Harvard Commencement week, and a girl with her companion was leaving the dance rather early, and there was some confusion about the car after they left the door. The light must have shone full upon her where she stood and waited, but the man standing somewhere near the curbing was in shadow. She only knew that he was strong-looking, and distinguished-looking, and that he was tall. As she moved one of the orchids at her belt loosened and fell to the ground. He stooped and picked it up, with a quick glance into her face, and she turned, supposing he was some one she knew. But she was hurried toward the car, and in an instant they were off. Just before the building was out of sight she looked back. The young man was still standing where they had left him, and he had her orchid in his hand."

"He has it still—he will have it always," he responded, hoarsely, with his eyes on her face.

"It has been four years, and she was only a phantom of a summer night. He did not even know her name," she said quickly, a sudden catch in her voice betraying the inward tumult which she was trying vainly outwardly to conceal. The simple boy and girl incident, which somehow had managed to keep itself untarnished through the

years, had all at once taken on a tremendous significance before which she stood in a sort of awe.

"He did not then know her name," he said, very quietly, "but it was an easy enough matter to discover it; it was on every one's lips that night, and her departure had not passed unnoticed. He only remained, however, long enough to be absolutely sure. Then, he went away—to Europe and to work. That evening marked the beginning for him of a new era of existence. It meant an awakening and a more complete consecration—the rousing of whatever powers were in him, for achievement, for concentration of effort. He never doubted that some day he would be able to lay something worthy at her feet. He could not let himself doubt it for an instant. In the meantime he could only work and wait. Through failure, through discouragement, and sometimes through utter despair, he toiled incessantly. But through it all her face was the star that beckoned—hers the one he saw always in his dreams."

"And he did not—he did not once forget?" She was trembling visibly.

From across the hall there came the first notes of a Chopin nocturne, exquisitely rendered, the music blending deliciously with the sounds of the summer night.

He did not answer. And in the midst of a silence, heavy, oppressive, unsupportable, she looked up proudly, and with a swift, flashing smile in whose sweetness there was yet something that half mockingly adjured.

His eyes, holding their full confession, met hers without a flicker.

"He did not forget—he will never forget," he answered, slowly and steadily.

CHAPTER V

THE VISION SPLENDID

As the next three weeks of summer swept like a gorgeous pageant before their eyes, weeks spent in the midst of the most enchanting surroundings, and crowned by a constant and highly stimulating companionship, there came to the young poet a simple, elemental strength that seemed to link him with a period of more powerful emotion than belongs to our analytical, complicated day. For in him Love manifested itself with all the might that one could think of as marking its sincerest human indwelling; so that his whole being, reflecting the inner glory, was but an expression of the single energy that was now dominating him.

They had various methods of entertaining themselves, which altered with the nature of the day, or at some impulse of Evelyn's, which frequently sent them on long difficult jaunts that taxed their physical powers to the point of healthful weariness when nightfall drove them back, hungry, happy, and in a mood to welcome both the substantial feast awaiting them and the comfortable chairs on Mrs. Chisholm's cool, vine-shaded veranda.

And whether they made their way on horseback, or in one of the huge carryalls that bore a neighboring house-party to some point of interest—Glassy, or Hebron, or Pinnacle—Evelyn, half resisting, half yielding to the intoxication of his presence, found herself hurried onward

under the spell of it into a sort of glad and speedy development like that of a superb flower expanding beneath a tropic sun.

The thorough simplicity of the life she was now living, in grateful contrast with the stifling artificiality of other days, the appeal of nature to her newly aroused temperament, tempestuous, despite a carefully acquired surface equipoise, above all, the effect upon her whole organism of unlimited companionship with a man like Geoffrey, whose freedom from complexity, and whose direct, unabashed, and evident love for her made straight for the mark, while he held his emotions in a kind of leash that seemed to make only the more real the tremendous power and passion of the man—all, all were driving her headlong into a maelstrom of feeling that she had neither the inclination nor the capacity to combat.

She became more thoughtfully beautiful, more tenderly spiritualized, and, in consequence, far more alluring, the wild poetry and mystery, the hint of "tragical liveliness" that ever surrounded her blending with the suggestion of deeper things of the soul than had hitherto been pronounced in her; as if emerging from a sort of secret abeyance, these now were struggling up in her, eager, insistent, clamoring for life and for expression.

Perhaps Geoffrey's strongest hold upon her, apart from the more serious response that her nature made to his, lay in his capacity to wait and to be silent, even when desiring her most. A love that was as real and as compelling as his, and that yet would not hurry her through any soft yielding on his part to the senses until he believed her to be entirely his, was something that made to her particular appeal, revealing, as it seemed, not only a rare fineness of feeling, but a species of self-control

seldom attained by a temperament so healthfully alive and so ardent.

When the climax that each had been coolly defying—he, with a certain gravity, she, with all the gay persiflage which her readiness could command, and which at times gave to her demeanor the merry bravado of a half-frightened boy, whistling to keep his courage up—came at last, it was with a directness that summoned all that was in her to meet its tremendous force. For it found her still dallying upon that exquisite borderland where a woman delights to linger in fearful joy, well knowing that but a step beyond lies a vast, dim, and unknown region, into which a mere word or look may plunge her, and in whose confines she shall discover the utmost realities of life for weal or woe.

The two were returning one day on horseback, after a ten-mile ride, in the twilight of what had been a golden August afternoon, and doubtless there was something in his face that warned her all at once of the approach of the supreme moment for she suddenly grew pale.

Rather abruptly Geoffrey had ceased talking, and after a moment he drew rein. He was strangely silent, and his gaze was turned not upon her but upon the far distant horizon with a look upon his features that made her catch in her breath. Presently he raised his arm and pointed with his crop, the look of awe and rapture in his poet's eyes thrilling her through and through.

"The unscanned West—and the hills of dream!" he quoted softly under his breath, and in his voice there sounded with the intensely personal application of the words a distinct note of triumph.

She did not speak, and a moment afterward they

entered Mrs. Chisholm's domain, and made their way slowly up the long avenue beneath the whispering pines. Then they passed further on to the stiles in the rear of the building.

None of the servants was in sight, and to Geoffrey, in the waning light, the place wore the look of some lovely, lonely, enchanted abode in which his Lady of the Hills well might hide herself, in order that here in hallowed privacy she might surrender herself to him, and whence he should bear her away to that far-off land of achievement and of fame that ever called with such imperious summons to him.

He glanced quickly at her, but her face was as quickly averted, as if by some subtle intimation she knew the thought he would utter, although he made no attempt at speech. And in the silence that fell between them, the meaning of the impending moment gripped the heart of each and held it spellbound.

Then suddenly his features grew white and set. He sprang from his horse and came straight to her side. He stood a moment looking her steadily in the eyes.

It was a long moment, yet swift, blinding, and filled with things vast and unutterable. And presently she turned a little helplessly and her eyelids drooped and faltered. But his gaze still gravely held her; and again, realizing the full import of the act, poignantly alive to her own capitulation in every nerve and fiber of her being, with the sense of freedom that is born of thralldom, she slowly raised her eyes to his—only to open them once more upon that splendid vision which comes but once, and which for each was to symbolize not only an exalted human love but all deep things of the spirit.

She slipped lightly from the saddle, and he caught her in his arms,

CHAPTER VI

A HORROR OF GREAT DARKNESS

"You have had visitors, my dear," Mrs. Chisholm called out from the piano—"those two exceedingly vivacious young women from New Orleans, twins, I think you said they were, and I can well believe it, for they are as much alike as two black-eyed peas, and about as intelligent. I have been much fatigued. In my young days girls of their age knew better than to chatter incessantly in the presence of their elders, and to intersperse their conversation with unknown slang expressions of doubtful origin. However, they volunteered a somewhat surprising piece of information."

Mrs. Chisholm turned slowly on her piano stool and studied with no uncertain scrutiny the tall figure in white arrested a moment in the doorway, and carelessly twirling a large rose-wreathed garden hat in her hands.

The involuntary start, followed by an immediate return to a former nonchalance, did not escape the keenly observant old eyes, though the self-command that marked the action aroused Mrs. Chisholm's admiration, and appealed strongly to her racial pride.

She had her own reasons, and most excellent ones, for believing that Evelyn for the past four days had been under an intense strain.

"I was not very far away, Aunt Harriet."

"But nevertheless quite too far, my dear, to be discovered. At all events, Drusie could not find you. The

young women came to bid farewell to you, and also to be the bearers, I should say, of a bit of gossip. It seems that young Mr. Baylor"—Mrs. Chisholm paused a moment and readjusted her glasses—"it seems that young Mr. Baylor, whom we have not seen here since last Monday, has deserted their house-party—summoned rather imperiously as it appears by a beautiful, and, I suspect, designing young married woman who has made her appearance in the neighborhood as the guest of a family living on the other side of Hendersonville. The subject was mentioned only incidentally, and quite as if such an occurrence were not one to occasion censure. But a married woman, a *married* woman, my dear, can have no proper hold upon a young man's time and attentions. It is what I always tried, though unsuccessfully, I fear, to impress upon your sisters. And I said as much to those two silly young women, who seem sadly in need of instruction in such matters. But they only laughed immoderately, and changed the subject abruptly."

Evelyn stood quite still in the doorway. The sudden flush that had swept into her cheeks at mention of Geoffrey's name had slowly faded, but she was smiling softly as she waited, watching absently the little old lady, who silently, and with a sharp compression of the lips, reached for a heavily encumbered work basket on the music stand. The delicate hands fumbled a moment nervously among the embroidery silks and other appurtenances of the basket, and finally drew something forth.

Mrs. Chisholm once more darted a keen and questioning glance into Evelyn's face, and then held out an oblong envelope on which her niece's address was traced in a strong, picturesque masculine handwriting.

"It has been here, I am mortified to discover, since last Tuesday," she said, "but I trust it relates to nothing of

serious import. One of the servants from the home of my relatives the Chisholms brought it over early on that day, and Drusie, knowing you were out, and being a lazy thing, unwilling to give herself an extra step, instead of taking it to your room, dropped it, with reprehensible carelessness, into my work basket, where I only a few moments ago discovered it. I have reproved her, of course, but that does not mend matters."

Evelyn crossed the room quickly, and took the note into her hands. As her eyes fell upon the superscription, recognized instantly as penned by Geoffrey from her familiarity with the letter he had long ago sent her, a warm crimson flooded cheek and neck and brow, while her whole being, a moment before a trifle tense and overborne in spite of her fine effort at disguisement, seemed suddenly to effloresce into radiant life and gladness.

Mrs. Chisholm, witnessing the unconscious transformation, the suggestion of large potentialities for emotion and for sorrow which the young face, with its ever-haunting reminder brought acutely before her, dropped her eyes. When she raised them a moment afterward Evelyn was gone, and all at once the little old lady's gaze, piercing the past, softened, became vaguely troubled, and grew dim.

Evelyn sat down by the open window of her bedroom, her pulses throbbing in a tumult of expectation and of haste as she opened the letter. His first love letter!—unless that other one sent to her from Europe could be counted as a love letter too, which, with a low, happy laughter, and a soft crimsoning she half admitted it could.

At last then she would have explanation full, if belated, of his absence at this most critical moment in their

intimacy when he himself could scarcely know the extent of his subjugation of her hitherto untamed spirit. Under the strange, blank silence of the last four days, the intolerable suspense, her pride had suffered in a proportion that seemed to measure itself with the completeness of her surrender; although the confusion in her mind made by Mrs. Chisholm's repetition of the young girls' story had apparently vanished almost with its appearance, and she had sought to put the thing from her as a senseless fabrication, built up without thought of harm out of a succession of ordinary events and topped by her great-aunt's morbid disapproval of the "unholy license of modern society."

She believed she did not doubt him for an instant. She was too sure of him—and of herself—to offer that abasement to them both. And with the first impassioned words of his letter the whole incident was momentarily obliterated from her thoughts—swept away by a tidal wave of hallowed emotion. Once more she was in his arms, and his breath was against her cheek, stirring the tiny tendrils of hair about her ear and thrilling her through and through, as delicately, yet in entire response, she gave herself to him in all the abandonment of a great first love.

But again it was thrust upon her unwilling thoughts. After reading two-thirds of the letter she paused a moment, caught in her breath, and went on. He was unfolding now the reason why she would not see him until the following Saturday evening, telling of the young married friend—an acquaintance of long standing—who had unexpectedly arrived, and who wished to consult him during her brief sojourn in relation to certain important private matters of her own. And he added boldly that he expected to spend the next five days with her, explaining that as all the masculine portion of the household in

which she was visiting had temporarily departed, she had appealed to him, being greatly desirous of seeing something of the region. "You will understand—and pardon, won't you, darling? You know the rest of my life is to be yours—a dedication to you. And after all, it is to be for just a few days."

The letter fluttered to her feet. She paled. What was it—what was it that stung? The words were simple, straightforward, directly to the point—and yet— Could it actually be that she was going to allow herself to harbor a suspicion? She put the idea from her as something ghastly, hideous in its mere suggestion even, a sense of shame for her momentary eclipse of faith filling her with remorseful feeling. And yet—was there not a slight constraint, a hesitation? And who was this unknown woman who at her whim, and at such a moment, could take him from her? What mattered it whether she saw the North Carolina country or not? There was a sort of grim humor and retribution in a situation she could not have imagined—a situation that reduced her, Evelyn Tyler, the flattered, the sought, the hitherto unsuccessfully besieged, to the low plane of the vulgarly jealous, while she vainly rebelled against the condition that could compel her to stand aside, and to wait five long days for her lover.

She caught herself up with a start, aghast at the strange bitter on-rush of emotion that was gripping her heart, and revolting in proud disgust. The moments slipped.

She glanced at the clock. It was nearly five. She would go out—out into the woods, and she would put away as unworthy of her all this wretched, unfounded misgiving that was rapidly driving her into a state of miserable distraction.

A few moments later she was in walking costume, and making her way down the shadowy, sun-flecked avenue.

She walked far, taking an unfrequented path that led her finally into the depths of what seemed the veritable forest primeval, dim, murmurous, remote, filled with lurking shadows and strange mysterious whisperings. And here, once more, with the swish of pine and of hemlock, the old sweet message of the woods that must have brought balm to the spirit of the first woman after the gates of Eden had closed her out, sounded in her ears, while Nature, like a patient mother, laid a cool and quieting hand upon her heated brow, bound up her bruised heart, and finally brought her back to something like a state of peacefulness.

She was even smiling a little to herself, softly, in subdued reminiscence, as there came to her snatches of conversation she had had with Geoffrey on the many long tramps they had taken together, when, having clambered up a steep hillside densely covered with undergrowth, her attention was caught by the sound of voices evidently coming from the neighborhood of a tiny stream down at the foot of the ravine.

She stood a moment listening indifferently to the vague, intermittent undertone of a man's deep notes following from time to time upon a woman's clear treble. From where she was, well hidden in a thicket of laurel, not a creature was visible, and save for that low, continuous, droning sound, now louder and more insistent, as the woman's voice rose, now sinking to an indistinct hum like the noise of bees in flight when the man was speaking, only the deep stillness of the forest, vast and impenetrable, enwrapped her.

Presently she took a few steps forward, and impelled by a desire to discover the exact locality of the two per-

sons down below in order that, when moving on, she might avoid them, she pushed aside the intervening branches. The next moment she fell back into the shelter of the shrubbery as if struck across the face with a lash, and there stood transfixed.

Far off, yet in full view, two people were sitting on a fallen tree beside the little stream of the ravine, their horses grazing nearby. The man was Geoffrey, and at his side was a young woman of slim and graceful figure, the pale brown hair beneath its black riding hat framing a face of cold but striking beauty. The woman was small, with tiny hands and feet, and her features were Grecian in their thorough symmetry. There was something forceful and strangely arrestive in her aspect, which breathed power, decision, intellectuality in every line and movement. She was, moreover, of evident high birth, for there was about her the unmistakable signs of an inheritance of centuries of polish and of contact with the more cultured exponent of the social order. Yet there was that in her face in the presence of which one instinctively shrank—a sort of secret light as of an inward bluish flame that kindled yet did not warm.

Her face was tense, and she was talking under an evident terrible excitement as if the very foundations of her being were shaken. But her voice was low, well-guarded, vibrant, and from time to time she darted a vigilant glance out of her steel gray eyes into her companion's face.

Geoffrey spoke, and the woman suddenly buried her face in her hands, weeping bitterly. When she raised her head, after a moment, her voice, tremulous with sobs, had in it a weird note of peculiar, piercing beauty.

Once more he spoke, and again she buried her face in her hands. And then, all at once, a startling thing oc-

curred. With a sudden movement the woman took the handkerchief from her eyes, turned a deep, full look upon the young man at her side—and, sobbing, flung herself into his arms! A moment afterward she had sprung to her feet, grasped her horse's bridle rein, and vaulting lightly into the saddle was gone with the swiftness of the wind, and with a dazzling surety.

Geoffrey rose—yet rather tardily, it seemed, for already there was an echo from down the glen. He stood perfectly still for an instant. Then, with a smothered exclamation, he, too, leaped into the saddle and was away—while Evelyn, like one petrified, stood hearing his horse's hoofs as they beat upon the rocky path following hard in pursuit, and finally blending with the first sounds, until each grew fainter and fainter, and at last died away.

But after the night of agony that followed, her sense of justice which, through all the long hours had lain like a dead thing before her eyes, began to revive; and she told herself with a sort of hard candor that Geoffrey was blameless. The look of blank astonishment on his features at the woman's strange and apparently unprovoked action was something that she could not question. Even to her shocked and overwrought mind his manner had seemed less like that of a lover than of one who seeks to soothe, to strengthen, to encourage. Nevertheless, the pale ghost of doubt and the presence of acute and active misery remained. Her nerves had become unstrung. And in her inability to pluck out the heart of the mystery, her feeling toward him became cold and estranged—the result of a weakness that had at the outset its origin in a virtue.

For it was the finer part of her, exacting, yet delicate

and beautiful, that revolted at even the outward semblance of untruthfulness. And though she was forced to exonerate him in this act, the vague jealousy that had been aroused in her led her subsequently to a course which, if analyzed and reduced to its source, was prompted by an uneasy suspicion of a past intimacy existing between the two that this finer part of her, demanding perfection, resented.

Thus, in harboring doubt, natural and human though she believed it to be, there was the first turning away from light and peace and a turning toward darkness and unrest. And thus the forces of tragedy were set in motion. Henceforth invisible hands seemed about her, urging her onward into unjustifiable action, thrusting her downward into the abyss of woe. So that when Geoffrey returned on Saturday evening, the fifth day after his departure, it was a person strangely altered from the lovely, yielding, wholly trusting being he had but recently left that awaited him.

The two first met in the presence of others, and in circumstances that for Evelyn outwardly relieved the situation of its difficulty, giving her opportunity of making her suave, adventitious, and wholly inexpressive greeting appear, as she believed, merely the usual formal reception that a well-bred woman before observers offers alike to the stranger and to the man of her choice. The occasion was an impromptu gathering upon her aunt's moonlit veranda of some eight or ten persons, young women and young men of the neighborhood in whom Evelyn's sparkling wit and beauty had aroused the distant and worshipful interest which, with the very youthful and inexperienced, readily lends itself to a celebrity of her order.

Geoffrey, unbidden, was a late arrival, and the clock on the stairway was sounding the hour of ten as he came quickly up the long avenue, with face aglow.

He stood an instant at the foot of the steps, his glance running swiftly over the group, greeted the others simply and cordially, moved quietly through their midst, and at last stood bowing before Evelyn.

But with the first look into her face as she rose, his sensitive nature was stabbed. He was speechless, and over his steadfast young countenance, unable, a moment before, quite to conceal its secret joy, a sudden shadow fell. He waited a brief time, detained by her generalities, then, with merely a word or two and an inclination of the head in acknowledgment, he moved away, and took the seat offered him by one of the laughing New Orleans twins in the doorway, who drew aside her muslin skirts for him with flattering alacrity, and for half an hour held him listening, as one hears things in a nightmare, to her chatter.

Then presently the torturing dream seemed to dissolve itself. The little company blended, became vaguely confused, and at last broke up. And with merry song and laughter the young voices went down the avenue, and melted into other sounds of the summer night.

The two finally stood alone upon the moonlit veranda. There was a moment of eager, silent questioning, and his expression changed.

He came instantly to her side, and again bent a deep, searching look upon her downcast face, inscrutable still, and cold as if it had lain for centuries imbedded in a glacier. Yet her manner was misleading. It was apparently without deliberate attempt. It gave the impression of being in no way premeditated. There was not even the suggestion of a desire to wound. Merely a total absence of

all feeling—a death of that impassioned loveliness which so recently had shone in speech and voice and feature.

He made a sharp gesture, as of one enduring an intolerable anguish, and then grasped her hands firmly and fiercely, hurting her in his vise-like grip, his face becoming every instant more wan and haggard, and his eyes bloodshot. For a long moment he gazed in mute, insistent demand.

“Evelyn!” The word was wrung from him at last like the cry of a wounded animal. “In God’s name what is the meaning of this—speak!” And then, his voice breaking, as a cold perspiration gathered on his brow, “Does it mean—can it mean that—that you have—made a mistake?”

She withdrew her hands, and moved away without raising her eyes. She hesitated a moment and then spoke—slowly and evenly, in the same studied tone in which she had spoken to him when addressing him in the presence of others half an hour before.

“Perhaps it does mean that—just that,” she said.

A silence awful in its import seemed to follow upon her words. It was just as if a black curtain had dropped before her eyes, hiding him from her, while a horror of great darkness encompassed her about.

He moved away, his stalwart young form resting limply against one of the vine-wreathed pillars of the porch. The odor of moonflower was wafted to her, heavy, oppressive, from where he stood, and in the pale light a silver poplar nearby kept up a ghostly beckoning. But she could not see his face. It was turned resolutely from her in a proud, instinctive shielding that was touching in its boyish simplicity. Perhaps it was that mute appeal, together with the flaccid, broken look of his aspect—as if not only the physical muscles but the moral and

mental support of his whole being had given away—that suddenly touched the dormant springs of her heart.

A start and shiver shook her, and her expression grew less tense. She had gone further than she meant. But she was struck dumb and appalled by the majesty of his suffering, the man's stern aloofness after the shock. She tried to speak, but a malevolent destiny seemed to bear her on and hold her in an icy dumbness; so that she could only stand wistful, silent, helpless under his scorn when, after a long time, he flung out at her from between his clenched teeth:

"Then it has all been a mockery and a delusion—a hideous travesty upon sacred things. You did not love me—you could never have loved me—you were merely playing with me."

Then suddenly his voice, which an instant before had been hoarse and broken, became hard and controlled, while a great dignity enfolded him in an austere and impenetrable calm.

"During these five interminable days in which I have been dreaming of you, loving you with madness and also with a devoutness that was simply untranslatable, you have been here forgetting my very existence even or despising me in your heart for daring to lift my eyes to you."

She made a feeble gesture of dissent, but words failed her. She tried to move, but her feet had become like leaden weights, and refused her. He waved her back, perceiving the slight bending of her form.

"There is nothing more to be said between us. I—I understand."

Once more she struggled to find voice. In spite of the startling and poignant realization of the necessity of immediate speech, she could not speak. The situation

was desperate. It would bear no dallying. A mortal peril was upon her, but a mist was gathering before her eyes, strange noises were sounding in her ears—echoes of the sure, oncoming steps of tragedy. The ground beneath her feet seemed to heave and whirl, and Geoffrey's face in the darkness closing in upon her stood out for an instant, white and terrible, then grew dim. She had grown ashen to the very lips.

But he did not see the change in her—he would not look upon her face. Despite his outward quietude, a profound and awful change was taking place within him, just as if faith and hope and goodness were being crucified. And in the rending of the tie between them he seemed to become a being whose whole nature had undergone a secret downward revolution. He took an abrupt step forward, and paused.

"May God forgive you for what you have done," he said slowly, "but I never will!"

And then, without so much as a backward look, he went rapidly down the steps and out into the darkness.

When she came to herself she was lying in a huddled heap on the veranda, and the clock on the stairway was striking eleven. In the space of one hour, since Geoffrey, with face aglow, had come hurrying up the steps to her, the whole earth had become changed, withered and scorched just as if a forest fire had swept it—and life stretched a hopeless waste before her eyes.

But it could not—it *could* not be. She struggled to her feet. She would write to him—yes, she would write—she would explain.

But again Geoffrey's face in its still wrath subdued her. Could she write to him? Could she endure again the agony of his possible scorn? Could she tell him that

it had all happened so suddenly, that she had not really meant to do it, that she had meant only to withdraw a little and then, woman-like, to forgive? Could she do it?

She sat down on one of the benches against the wall of the porch and covered her face with her hands. The thing was impossible. It would seem like a lowering of her very womanhood to attempt to recall him now. She must take her punishment—the punishment that by her own act she had brought down upon herself. She had been granted the heavenly vision, but she had been disobedient to it. As wave after wave of agony swept over her, it was the one thought that repeated itself, held her in its appalling grip.

But gradually, as the moments slipped, her intense buoyancy of temperament, her natural exuberance of life and hopefulness began once more to combat the black despair that had assailed her.

She sat up and pushed the hair from her brow, shivering a little, and suddenly aware of the cool night wind that was rippling through the tree tops and chilling her to the bone. She rose and softly entered and closed the front door; and as she made her way on tiptoe up the stairs her heart was beating clamorously to a secret refrain. On the morrow he would come back—her hold upon him was too real to be broken by an unconsidered word—the thing was too frightful to contemplate. Oh, on the morrow he surely, surely, surely would come back!

But he did not come back.

When, after that wild night in the woods, he staggered into the bedroom prepared for him at the home of his friends, day was breaking, and the servants about the place were a-stir. At first glance one would have said from his appearance, his swollen countenance and wretched, disheveled aspect, that he had spent the hours

in unseemly carousal, and that after a night of riotous excess he had in shame and self-loathing at last come to himself with the first pale streaks of dawn.

But another look at him would have corrected the error. The man was drunk, it is true, but with no other intoxicant than that of a misery so profound and so devastating as to leave an ineradicable mark upon his features, rendering him changed to outward view as inwardly he was.

As he entered the bed-chamber he recognized vaguely that a lamp on the table in the center of the room which had evidently been lighted some time during the evening before in anticipation of his return was still burning, although the flame was low. He paused an instant mechanically to extinguish it, and as he did so his glance fell upon a letter placed conspicuously to attract attention.

The envelope bore the New York postmark, and was addressed in the handwriting of an old and trusted friend of his father's, one confidentially acquainted with the family affairs, but little inclined to correspondence save in a case unusual and urgent.

Geoffrey quickly broke the seal, and with the first terse, ominous sentences there came over his scarred countenance an expression of harsh, sardonic humor. The letter was brief, but it contained much.

It summoned him immediately to New York, told of the serious if not mortal illness of his father, mentioned the collapse of the great brokerage firm of which the latter was a member, and ended by gently, yet in no equivocal manner, making known a succession of events that for Geoffrey, in the final adjustment, would mean not only an abrupt ending to his premeditated career, but a condition of things that would leave him penniless.

PART II

TIME'S WHEEL RUNS BACK OR STOPS

CHAPTER I

CAROLINE DELAFIELD

THE electric car in the distance, intercepted a moment before by some accident or other obstruction, still showed no signs of progress. But only one person seemed at all disturbed by the delay—a young woman standing at a crossing, who awaited, with evident impatience, the belated trolley.

It was midsummer in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, and orchard, field, and meadow were at the height of that lush and riotous perfection of which a beneficent spring, dispensing light invigorating showers, cool, sparkling days, and nights unharmed by the blight of frost, had given such fair and cheering promise.

In the glare of the July sun, Main Street, Lexington's ancient thoroughfare, presented a lively aspect, notwithstanding the heat. But the young woman surveyed the scene with scant interest and a half-contemptuous arching of her delicate brows. A moment before she had turned to examine the Court House clock and had observed that, as usual, the hands upon the face which looked toward Main Street and upon that which looked toward Cheapside registered a curious variation in time. The serene and lofty disregard exhibited by her townspeople in relation to this and certain other even more glaring negligences filled her in her present mood with a superb disdain that held her coldly aloof from all personal implication. Obviously she was not one to thrill

with love of Kentucky to the extent of being, like many, unmindful of its defects.

She was a woman of twenty-eight or thirty years of age; and though she was small of stature, there was in the slight form, with its erect patrician carriage and distinct *aplomb*, something that instantly arrested attention—a sort of secret power and forcefulness, an inherent energy that expressed itself by countless esoteric signs no less than by the prompt steadiness of decision and of movement that followed upon her cool, deliberate glances.

As she entered the car, there was reflected again the preoccupied expression of a moment before. It was a perplexed and well-nigh baffled expression, and it was a look that her face had worn almost continuously since early morning, when Alfred's letter containing its most unwelcome announcement had come upon her with a shock as appalling as if it had been the sound of the trump of doom. Its effect, however, arousing the instinct of her temperament into immediate action, was to summon all her powers, and to bring her back at once from a neighboring county, where she had been spending a fortnight, still and statuesque in her outward impassivity, yet none the less aware that her whole being was tingling with the sense of impending combat, and with the stimulus of a fixed resolve.

And yet, after all, she argued, as she absently handed out her fare, the repeated click of her small silver purse alone marking the impatience of her thoughts, was it not precisely what one might have expected of Alfred—that most charming, irrational, and precipitate of individuals—Alfred, escaped from her dominating, sisterly control, and with another woman's star in the ascendant?

She turned her eyes resolutely to the window, while,

with the monotonous insistence of the old Greek chorus, a single refrain that all along had been sounding dimly in her ears, burst forth into loud and painful prominence: If only out of the great wide world he had not chosen Her—Her—Her!—the one woman in it whom, secretly, she hated, and whom, with bitter shame, she acknowledged that she feared.

The car had borne her swiftly through the town and its confines, and had finally paused for the last time, and at the limit of its circuit, before she realized that it had started. Since she failed to rise, the old conductor tipped his cap, and with the familiarity of long acquaintance smiled blandly, as he towered above the dainty figure.

"Take you back to town again, ma'am," he remarked, facetiously, "if you don't fancy walkin' this hot day. Blamed if I'd go traipsin' 'round on a dusty road if I had that little electric o' yours and that big auto you an' Mr. Merriweather's got out there—specially when the mercury's ninety in the shade."

Caroline Delafield seemed scarcely aware of the attempted pleasantry. She turned a somewhat surprised glance upon the broad, good-natured countenance before her, and rose abruptly.

"It's powerful hot, ma'am," the conductor observed, unabashed, as he assisted her from the car.

But the young woman was in no mood to favor his loquacity. She shook her head. "I shan't mind the walk, and I am not at all warm," she said, absently and curtly.

She moved with a light but unhurried gait, and being occupied with far weightier matters, refused to notice that her short dark skirt had become flecked with dust, or to admit that she herself was at all disturbed by the scorching rays of the July sun, when, after walking a

quarter of a mile or more down the blinding road, she came to a stone gateway that formed the entrance to a noble, park-like enclosure through the dense green of which one caught glimpses of tall, white pillars in the distance.

Before entering the gate, however, she stood a moment looking in the direction of the country-place opposite—a gloomy old red-brick, vine-covered structure, with a colonial doorway, set not far from the roadside but almost hidden behind evergreen trees and a riot of shrubbery. No one was visible save a lean, elderly gentleman in a frock coat of somewhat eccentric cut, who was sitting reading on a bench in the shade. Presently he looked up, caught sight of the young woman, and rose, making her a bow of exaggerated deference in which there was a curious mingling of old-time gallantry and grim, sinister jocularly. But he made no further movement toward her, and after an instant's hesitation, and with only a slight bow, she passed on.

"How he hates me—miserable old pessimist that he is!" she said to herself, viciously. A feeling of irritability toward the dark, picturesque figure beneath the trees—a state of mind which, already fully aroused, the event of the day had strengthened—caused her involuntarily to quicken her footsteps for an instant, while she held her small head proudly. "Not even to come and ask me about my father—!" She flushed indignantly in recognition of the slight. Then, dismissing the subject with a shrug, and with a smile that was as ironical as his own, her features once more assumed their brooding, statuesque calm, and she pressed on more quietly along the dim, winding road, only vaguely conscious of the beautiful woods, the delicious sounds of the summer day, and the sparkling sky bending above her in glittering blue.

A few moments afterwards, she stood before the door of the great white house whose closed green-painted shutters were a silent denial to all visitors.

She was admitted by Penelope, a comely, middle-aged negro woman, whose ebony countenance reflected a blank surprise.

"Honey, how yo' pa is?" the woman demanded, with a half-startled and scrutinizing glance into the pale, beautiful face before her. "You sho do look same ez you'd been daid an' buried an' then dug up."

"He is not any better. It will be weeks before he can be well enough to be brought home—if ever."

The tone was restrained without hint of emotion, and the gray eyes wandered a trifle absently in the direction of the lawn, neglected during the fortnight and beginning to be overgrown with weeds.

Penelope reflected. "Well, honey, de Lawd knows ef yo' pa had to have dat fit, 'twuz a good thing he done had it down in Woodford County, whar he sister live an' whar he kin git good nussin'. Me an' you ain' got much use foh sick folks, nohow, an' yo' pa, he wus'n a hen on a hot griddle an' a b'ar wid a sore haid, whin he's laid up."

Caroline Delafield scarcely listened. "Come up to my room in half an hour, Penelope; I wish to speak to you," she said, as she turned away and moved in the direction of the stairway.

As she passed by the great silent rooms to her bed-chamber she was conscious of a momentary thrill. At least she was mistress here for a little while longer, and her intensely dominating spirit, delighting in the mere exercise of command, was for an instant made forgetful of the contents of that fateful letter; while in once more asserting her right to control she experienced a

sort of mental readjustment that was an actual temporary relief.

But once in her bedroom the thought of it returned to her with redoubled pain. She got quickly into something loose and cool, and sitting down in the wide window-seat, she read it once again, slowly, from the beginning to the end.

It was a hurried, exuberant, boyish overflow—a lover's tribute to the woman he adored tinged with a tender brother's solicitude for the sister whom he had long protected, and who now, with the abrupt change that had come into his life, might be inclined to feel herself supplanted. Presently she came to this paragraph:

"So you see, dear, it really cannot make to you the smallest difference in the world—so far at least as your relation to me is concerned; and I daresay you will still be mistress over our household. The truth is, I strongly suspect that she is not over-burdened with domesticity—she is not like you, fond of management. As for you, I don't precisely see how you could live now without a little principality of your own to direct. But I think you need not have much fear that she will not be more than glad to allow the reins of government to remain in your hands. And oh, dear, as a final word, let me tell you once more that you just must love her! But of course you will. No one could help it. I can't."

Caroline Delafield's face was an interesting study. She read very slowly the closing sentences relating to certain alterations in the house that were immediately to be made, and put the letter back in its envelope. She sat thinking intently for a moment. Then, into the strained fixity of her look there came a sort of ironic composure, and the small teeth gleamed for an instant in a curious smile.

All at once she sank back and was very still in the deep window-seat. She had raised her tiny feet from the floor and made a sort of lair of the nook, and she lay strangely inert for one of her active temperament, entirely supine, seemingly lifeless almost, yet with something in the set, introspective gaze that was intensely, ominously vital.

The small face, very beautiful in its whiteness and stillness, rested against a cushion of dull crimson-colored silk, and her pale brown hair, unwound and falling lightly about her, enveloped the slim form like a cloud.

In truth, she was mortally stricken. At the most inopportune of moments the blow had fallen, and just when a clear and glowing future, made possible by this sojourn beneath her brother's roof, seemed opening up before her. Released a twelvemonth previous from her wretched roué of a husband, who had squandered all his patrimony and hers in his excesses, and who finally, after a slow death of paresis, had ended his existence in a private sanitarium, once more (having concluded her year of a distinctly outward and conventional mourning) she was free—free to expend her magnificent mental endowment in whatever direction she would, free to begin again, untrammelled by the galling bond that for eight years had held her, free to reconstruct, to live, and, yes, to love, if haply she were loved!

Was she—was she loved? Before the question which confronted her like the mocking ghost of an unfulfilled desire her haughty spirit writhed. On the dressing-table in full view there was a photograph in a silver frame toward which her eyes suddenly turned in a hard, imperious questioning—the photograph of a man still young, yet curiously lacking in all that was youthful, and with

something that gripped the imagination in a blended sense of pity and revolt through the medium of bitter memory that smoldered in the eyes.

It was surely not the face of a lover, yet it was something that he had but recently sent her. Her gaze rested a long time upon it, and then, with a low, savage laughter, she buried her face in the cushion.

But he was hers—almost hers, and was she one to fail in anything she had once set her mind to? Fail? How could she fail? Were not those words, spoken, it is true, in the midst of bodily weakness, when illness and despair had brought him to such low ebb that her own dominating will seemed all that was left to him to cling to, as coercive to-day as they were yesterday, before this terrible thing had come upon her? Why should she fear? With such a man as he both reason and instinct told her that she was more than safe—safer now than ever before.

Yet the insistent shame of it all would not be quieted, and she began to stir uneasily. But, oh, the exhilaration, the triumphant joy of having a hand in the sure making of a man's destiny—a man really worthy of the name! At the thought a swift crimson suffused her pale face and gave a sudden look of rare illumination to her cold, beautiful features.

At least, at least, she had become essential to him. That much had been gained with certainty by means of that eternal vigilance she had practiced which had made her influence always opportune in the slow process of upbuilding which had ultimately brought him back to something like a renewal of life and energies. And the woman who has become an essential to a man, her ready instinct was quick to perceive, is often not far away from that more intimate relation in which she shall know herself to be loved. To become the pivot around which his

whole existence should revolve was the supreme aim toward which all the strength of her being had ceaselessly lent itself for the past three months, or more.

With redoubled resoluteness of purpose she now faced the future. For Caroline Delafield was one of those women, known to most persons, and conspicuous in any community, in whom the love of power resides as a tremendous, devastating force, a mighty passion that sweeps everything before it, and that blinds the possessor to all high and noble things, often, when thwarted, imperiling many innocent victims in its merciless exercise of authority and in its undeviating aim.

Even in her small principality, as her brother had called his household, the keynote of this ultimate tendency was hourly sounded. Not a servant but felt it and trembled before it. But in the completeness of her sovereignty she had rested, alas, far too securely; and when, presently, Penelope's step was heard approaching, the more homely side of her overthrow forced itself upon her with added humiliation.

The woman entered with an odd little self-conscious simper that instantly caught her mistress' watchful eye. Mrs. Delafield raised herself with evident surprise and stared. But Penelope was by no means disconcerted. She rested her weight first on one foot and then on the other, and finally broke into a short, embarrassed laugh, which ended quite abruptly in a kind of sonorous whoop suggestive of a donkey's bray.

"Miss Ca'line," she announced, briefly and coyly, "I come to tell you I gwine git mah'ied!"

There was a moment of painful silence, and then Penelope went on bravely, undeterred by the chilling scrutiny to which she was being subjected.

"Yassum, Miss Ca'line, honey, yassum, I'm gwine git

mah'ied. You ain' gwine heah nothin' good of *him* fum none o' dese urr low-lifted niggers 'roun' heah, caze he's a demicrat. But 'tain' nothin' to me ef he's a demicrat or a muskrat," she declared with spirit.

"I wants you to gimme that light green silk deception-dress o' yourn, that un I seen you wear jes befor' Mr. John Delafield deceased, an' de big hat an' de white pa'sol, an' I gwine tie my crape veil 'roun' de waist, long o' bein' a grass-widder, an' I'm gwine git mah'ied in Pleasant Green church nex' Sadday night, an' I'm gwine have a cake-walk—an' then I'm gwine on a weddin'-tower to Bowlin' Green!"

This carefully planned program having been announced in a tone of evident finality, the young woman in the window-seat lay pondering thoughtfully.

Penelope's services, at all times valuable, in the present crisis were simply indispensable—a requisite without which the impending trial seemed something scarcely to be borne. From the moment when, three years before, the two had first met—Penelope presenting herself on that occasion without other recommendation than merely the simple description, "Country nigger what wants to hiah," and wearing the odd combination of a blue calico gown, a brown straw hat, and a long crape veil, the latter mournful adjunct having been resorted to as a challenge for special consideration from the living rather than as a mark of respect for the dead, and worn, obviously, in this instance with only the most worldly intent—there had existed between the mistress and her humble servitor, promptly engaged, one of those bonds that are unaffected by any separation of race or outward condition, and that are the result solely of inherent power mutually shared and mutually recognized.

For it was not merely when surrounded by such in-

aspiring accessories as gridiron and skillet and broiler that her strength came and Penelope rose to that height of excellence which enabled her to reign supreme; ostensibly an artist in the culinary line, she was far more. Her real genius lay in a gift for command. And beneath her sunny, well-favored countenance, her quiet movements, and her odd little bray of laughter, ready at any moment to break forth, there lurked a strength of will and of purpose, before which other servants quailed. But since the barbaric, in the last analysis, must inevitably give way to the cultured, will, Penelope surrendered wholly to her mistress, adoring the latter with the fierce and dog-like fidelity of a nature held firmly in the leash by a cool, unyielding, if not merciless, master-hand.

"Then Mose has died during the fortnight?"

The voice from the window-seat betrayed not a hint of the disturbance actually felt. It was a peculiar voice, most distinctly individual, and the words were spoken slowly, with the clear precision of one who, accustomed to speak much in foreign languages, speaks his own perfectly.

Penelope shook her head. "No'm, Miss Ca'line, honey, no'm, Mose ain' daid."

There was a slight rustle among the cushions before the lovely voice spoke again.

"Since Mose is still living, marriage for you is out of the question, if it be true, as you told me when you came to live with me, that you are his wife. Can it be that there has been any mistake?"

Penelope's eyes began to roam around the room. "No'm—no'm—'tain' no mistake; I done tole you I's mah'ied. Miss Ca'line, huccome you look so lak lil gal?"

The sally fell upon unheeding ears as a melancholy instance of wasted diplomacy. The small figure in the

white kimono was unmoved. Mrs. Delafield spoke with sudden nonchalance.

"Mose is a distinct impediment," she said, twirling unconcernedly the rings on her fingers, yet keeping a quiet eye on the woman, who was beginning to quail. "Marriage has certain disadvantages, you see."

Penelope dropped her eyes. Presently she looked up desperately.

"Miss Ca'line," she broke forth at last, with a sudden return to her odd little whoop, "ain' I done tole you Mose in de pen'tentiary? An' ain' dey gwine *keep* him in de pen'tentiary foh three mo' yeah?"

Expressing no amazement at this premeditated perfidy toward the immured Ulysses, and being evidently quite unburdened by a sense of responsibility in relation to the moral aspect of the case, the young mistress spoke a final word.

"Even though you should greatly prefer another person, and Mose is now the same as dead to you—" She was beginning absently, with an unconscious personal note, when she was arrested by the sudden look depicted with lightning swiftness upon the dark face.

Penelope's great pathetic eyes searched the countenance of her mistress in an agony of doubt. Apparently some powerful and secret feeling had been stirred by the thought that was penetrating her brain. Her hands clutched the back of a chair for an instant and then fell limply at her side, as she quickly moved a step or two forward under the impulse of a poignant dread.

"Does you think I done forgot *Mose*?" she whispered, huskily. And suddenly her whole expression changed, growing sad and patient and tender with that light which has shone upon the features of every woman who has loved and trusted erring man. "Honey," she added,

softly, "I ain' forgot—I ain' nuver gwine fergit tell de Jedgment-day! Don' you git to worritin' yo'se'f 'bout none o' dem niggers: I jes projec'in' wid 'em."

Mrs. Delafield rose. Though she had conquered, as usual, the little encounter did not add sweetness to her temper, already sufficiently acidulated by that fateful letter. She glanced in the direction of the chiffonier, on which she had placed it half an hour before.

"Then go to your kitchen, Penelope, and let me hear no more of this nonsense," she commanded, severely. "You will be greatly needed here. Mr. Alfred writes of extensive changes. Much of the house is to be re-furnished. The work must be begun at once—and finished in three weeks. He is about to be married."

The words had fallen from her lips in a sort of defiance of the announcement. She moved toward the window and drew back the muslin curtains. But she had not failed to see the immediate and astounding effect of her communication.

Penelope had turned obediently toward the doorway as the icy tones of her mistress commanded her to depart, but all at once she stood stock-still. Her lower jaw grew lax, her mouth gaped wide, and her eyes riveted themselves upon the tense, erect form before her in a comprehension that was all complete. Something truly far more subtle than surprise had struggled to the surface in her expression; and in the look of profound pity bent upon her, Caroline had her first practical realization of her approaching dethronement. The negress' low, crooning voice, tenderly cautious, as if directed to a hurt child, smote harshly upon her ears.

"Honey, what mought her name be?"

Caroline wheeled abruptly. She stood a moment surveying the faithful creature with a thoughtful, pene-

trating gaze that seemed to pierce her through and through—the slow, gauging look of an Oriental despot.

“It might be almost anything,” she deliberated, as if the subject had for the first time presented itself. And then, since the woman still waited, she turned once more to the window.

“It might be almost anything,” she repeated. “But it happens—” and into the cool imperiousness of her voice there crept a peculiar note—“it happens to be Tyler. She is Miss Evelyn Tyler,” she flung back over her shoulder.

CHAPTER II

HER WEDDING DAY

THE train for some time had been speeding through one of the loveliest portions of the bluegrass country; and the vivid effect of green and gold, as the sunlight flashed upon the dense foliage and the rich velvety turf, was making a panorama resplendent not merely in physical charm, but in that indefinable something that stirs like a quickly beating pulse throughout the region—something in tune with the passionate heart of summer, and that renders peculiarly in harmony with its environment the temperament of a people equally intense and prodigal as nature in this instance was revealing herself to be.

But though her eyes were fixed, apparently, upon the near and rapidly changing landscape, Evelyn's thoughts in reality had wandered far afield, coursing with even greater velocity than the hurrying train through the swift, onrushing succession of events which at last had brought her—like one tossed by a tempestuous sea until finally hurled upon an unknown shore—stunned and startled and still almost too bewildered for anything like clear thinking, to the strange consummation of this, her wedding-day.

Through all the excitement and stress and felicitation of the day: the suave urbanity of her two young married sisters who, present at a considerable sacrifice to their own inclination, and airily complacent in most becoming

new Parisian gowns, were the life of the occasion; her mother's bitter disappointment—disguised, it is true, under an outward polish, yet none the less apparent—that her favorite daughter should have made a marriage so far from brilliant; and lastly the deep and tender solicitude of her father as he folded her in his arms—through it all she had walked a serene and beautiful figure in white satin and old lace, apparently at peace with herself and with all the world. Not once had the bright calm been broken. Not once had she faltered in her part. One would have said that she was wholly satisfied.

Her expression at the instant, however, was not entirely tranquil. Once more, and at, as she dimly realized, a most incongruous moment, she was allowing herself a brief survey of the past three years—the years that separated her from that fatal night when she had broken with Geoffrey; and into the warm brown eyes turned, without design, yet persistently, away from the young husband at her side, there had come an absorption that seemed to render her forgetful of his very presence even. Several moments had passed since, unanswered, he had asked a direct question.

He watched her, as he too relapsed into silence, with a secret amusement at her complete unconsciousness of his fixed gaze upon her, and with a certain proud, half-shy sense of possession that brought a youthful flush to his brow.

He was a slender, boyish-looking person of the blonde type, whose thin aristocratic features reflected not only an extreme sensitivity but also a most delightful joyousness of temper that was winning in its mere heedlessness and in its thorough irresponsibility. His years, which, all told, did not number more than twenty-seven, sat upon him with a lightness that made it impossible for

one to think of him as a person capable of playing a part at all serious in the affairs of life. Energy there was in plenty, and a certain wiry agility that made itself known in a constant variety of expression, just as one felt intuitively it must in action. But one knew, through no difficult process of reasoning, but by a mere glance into the sunny, pleasant face, that whatever mental ability he possessed—and of this there seemed more a limitation than a lack—was still held in a sort of abeyance, while his cheerful, faun-like nature, refusing to be trammelled, gave only a sparse attention to the dull routine of daily work, or deliberately roamed afar to the blithesome call of wood and field.

It was in response to that call that he had met Evelyn. He had come upon her in the most opportune of moments when, emerging at last from the blackness which for three years had encompassed her, she was beginning gradually, through her natural resilience and healthfulness of being, to find existence not only tolerable but even at certain rare moments full of those swift, joyous surprises that so often in the old days had sent the blood racing through her veins.

They had met at a camp in the Adirondacks, where she was sojourning with a party of friends, one of whom he knew. And there had followed one of those sudden, tumultuous, and wholly inconsequent courtships, with its rash culmination, of which sages predict such dire things, and which, notwithstanding all prophesy, precept, and example, still continue whenever the quick blood of youth is fired to the point where reason is lost and impulse alone is paramount.

The boy's impetuosity had simply swept her off her feet. She persuaded herself that in his adoration of her, and in his natural sweetness and generosity of temper

she was to find at last that happiness for which she still with imploring hands wildly reached, and which again, far less imperiously, it is true, yet surely, seemed calling to her. She believed she had forgotten Geoffrey; just as she had finally convinced herself that if his love for her had been the real and mighty passion she had thought it to be he could not have passed, as he had done, so completely out of her life. Once more she told herself that she was going to be happy.

But a cloud—or was it merely a weariness, a natural reaction after the excitement of those six breathless weeks, when she, a modern Atalanta, had been outrun at last?—seemed to be darkening her radiance for the moment, and her face to her young husband was strangely sad. Seeing that only a few persons remained in the car, and that these were of a world entirely apart from his own, he allowed himself a slight alteration of manner. His shoulder rubbed lightly against hers, as he pressed a little closer to her, and he laughed, softly, boyishly, out of the depths of his great happiness.

“To think that six weeks ago I had never even seen you!” he whispered, in a rush of feeling, as the afternoon shadows, deepening in the lonely woods, reminded him that they were nearing the end of their journey. Then he added, out of deference to the look in her eyes that had surprised him just before he spoke, “Don’t—please do not think of anything sorrowful to-day. The rest of them back there will be able to manage somehow to do without you, but I—I just *had* to have you, you know.”

She turned, startled, at the sound of his voice, and her expression was for an instant vague and bewildered as of one waked suddenly out of a vivid dream. Then she threw a furtive glance about the car and a faint color rose in her cheeks. Two or three stolid-looking old farm-

ers engrossed in their newspapers, a pale-faced young woman with a child asleep in her arms, and two very young girls absorbed in each other's conversation, and watched over stealthily by a melancholy individual in a long black veil, were the occupants. But she scarcely needed the reassurance. In any case, she told herself, in half amused reflection, they would scarcely be taken for bride and groom. He looked absurdly young for her, as she was well aware; and to-day, his high spirits, held in bounds only by the extreme effort which conventionality demanded, gave special accent to his youthfulness.

"You haven't spoken a word to me for the last ten minutes," he murmured, reproachfully. "I have a million things to talk about. Isn't it a little difficult to understand how we can be just everything to each other, and yet know that there are great vast unexplored regions that are still before us? You are a positive stranger, after all."

She spoke quickly. "I tried, I did try to tell you everything," she said, paling a little.

He paused, wondering. "Oh, that!" he exclaimed, a light breaking in on him suddenly. "You mean about that other fellow, whoever he may be, whom you once imagined that you cared for? Well, I am not giving myself very much trouble about *him*," he chuckled. "I find it an easy enough thing to snap my fingers in his face to-day. If he had loved you as much as I do he would simply have had to have you, and I'm inclined to think he must have been a milk and water sort of chap, anyway. By the way, was he one of the fellows whose invitation you had to recall on account of the pater's illness?"

She shook her head.

"Didn't even invite him to the wedding?"

"No."

"Rather shabby treatment, wasn't it? And yet I'm not sure. My idea of a torture worse than anything inflicted by the inquisition would be to go to your wedding—to the other man. Oh, Evelyn, isn't it just heavenly to be married to each other?"

He broke off abruptly, his voice sinking down into a husky whisper, while he reached forward with the ostensible purpose to steady some of their belongings on the seat opposite, but in reality to hide his emotion.

Her face all at once grew sweet and tender, a sort of maternal indulgence showing in the slow smile she bent upon him. How young, how appealingly young, he seemed! Under all the complexity of thought and feeling of which she was capable at the moment, one idea stood out fixed and at the same time soothing to her mental confusion: the recognition of her tremendous power over him to lead him as she believed to higher things of life than without her he would ever have been able to accomplish. At college he had told her frankly he had been a little wild. That he was lacking in that sturdy strength which makes for resistance she had instantly suspected, while realizing perfectly at the same time that at the root his nature was yet pure and free from the effect of degrading indulgence.

Perhaps it was less a thinness in the moral stratum than the fact of a certain intellectual and physical immaturity that was immediately thrust upon her in those first days of their acquaintance when he had striven so bravely, yet unsuccessfully, to take her fancy by storm. She had found it difficult to reconcile herself to his inability to follow her into certain spiritual and mental realms in which she was prone to wander, the very names of her favorite books even being unknown to him, just

as in a minor way it was also a regret to her that the Kentuckian's proverbial height and brawn were things denied to him. Yet something—something drew her to him.

It was only after, in a rapid growth of friendship based upon certain inherent qualities of mind and heart, she had come to know the stirring sense of a renascent joy born of his natural exuberance and light-heartedness as well as his infatuation for her, that she had been able to understand the picturesque hold he had taken upon her, and the emotion of tenderness and of gratitude he had aroused. And if to her little world this marriage that seemed so strangely unambitious, in view of other offers she was suspected to have had, had come with a shock that later developed into a sort of amused surprise, she herself knew that it was because of the very absence of the things they noted that he had been able to win her when so many other men had wholly failed.

She turned to him now with one of her slow, beautiful smiles.

"Dear, I trust, I trust I shall never disappoint you!" Her voice had in it a trailing note of sweetness, and the shadow seemed completely lifted from her brow.

She reached forward and gathered up an illustrated comic magazine from among her things on the seat opposite, recalling the attempted witticism of one of the wedding-guests who had thrust it into her hands when leaving with the senseless remark that doubtless she would stand in need of something as humorous to keep her spirits up. Must the newly married be always subjected to such fatuity, she asked herself with a little inward shudder of disgust. And then, as their two heads, her brown and his light one, bent above the page, she whispered softly, and more to herself than to him, uncon-

sciously using the same words used long before to her great-aunt in North Carolina,

"I am going—I am going to find happiness!"

The boy did not speak at once, but his smooth blonde face went suddenly white and his hand against hers on the spread-out page trembled. Something in the tense, passionate ardor of the words, uttered, it is true, with the self-absorbed vehemence of one who seeks through mere magnificence of will to wrest from life the thing desired, had struck a chord of his being that sounded melodiously and softly, just as by accident one should strike harmoniously upon a key board while reaching for something beyond it. The moment had for him all at once taken on the sweet solemnity of a sacrament, and it meant to him only the threshold of that deeper and more intimate communion that would come with her complete giving of herself to him.

Involuntarily she shrank a little away from him and from the emotion she had aroused. She turned and looked out of the window.

"I have thought so many times to-day of your father. Wasn't it too distressing that he could not be with us—he and your sister?" she said gently, but in a voice grown calm and even again.

Young Merriweather's face changed quickly. He sat up, and into his eyes there came a sudden mist.

"Dear old dad," he exclaimed, tenderly, "he scarcely thought when he went off for a little innocent fishing on the banks of the Elkhorn that he was to bring this long illness on himself, so that he could not even get back home, in spite of his great longing. I don't believe he ever caught a fish in all the days of his life, but it is a pleasant little delusion of his that he is a second Izaak Walton."

"I could not help feeling," she pondered, sympathetically, "that we should have put the wedding off when we found he was not growing better. I am afraid it was a little heartless of us."

He moved nervously. "But he would never have given his consent," he answered, uneasily. "He was greatly disturbed as it was that your mother's plan for a large wedding had to be broken in upon because of him, and he insisted steadily that he would be well enough for him and Caroline to be present—until yesterday, when there came this slightly unfavorable change. Caroline preferred not to leave him, but she has never seemed very anxious. Not that that means much." Into the disturbance on the young face there came a whimsical smile. "She is not the kind ever to flicker under fire. She hates it down there in Woodford with our aunt and uncle. But of course there was no help for that."

Evelyn sat thinking. "You have told me so little about her," she said, presently, with a smile that broke into a low characteristic laughter, "and the few things that you have mentioned of her make her seem so—so formidable. I really am half frightened. Do you think she minds very, very much that you are insisting upon inflicting me on her? But of course she didn't want me. She has already told me as much. Her note was intended to be only elegantly non-committal—but I read between the lines."

Her expression was still a curious blending of seriousness and humorous introspection. Presently he shook his head.

"I can't quite make out just how you two will hit it off together. Caroline is a queer combination, and she has always been just a little too deep for me. She is only two years older, but she persists in treating me al-

ways as if I were her little lame, half-witted brother. I want you to like her, darling, for my sake. She has had a pitiful sort of life. I don't know how, being a Kentuckian, I ever managed to keep my hands off that miserable Delafield, with his villain's heart and his smooth ways. However, a better day seems dawning for her now, and it may happen that we shall not be able to keep her with us very long."

"You mean—?" Evelyn was striving to keep anxiety out of her voice. A painful shrinking from this unknown woman with whom her life was soon to be so intimately associated had made it difficult for her ever before to discuss her, even to the present small extent; and now particularly she drew back from further mention of her in the presence of his highbred loyalty. Yet the strange domination he had unconsciously confessed to was something that hurt both her pride and her vanity—a domination none the less real if secretly chafed against. "You mean—?" she repeated, since he did not answer.

He laughed shortly. "She will probably marry. I have thought since I got back it looked a good deal like that. Not that she would be quick to tell me. Caroline is not given to revealing her plans; and she usually shoots in the dark—so far as other people are concerned—and with deadly aim."

The train slowed into a station and he drew out his watch. A sudden light played upon his features. All at once her heart seemed to pause and then to begin to beat wildly. An odd sensation took possession of her, a strange giddiness in the brain.

"Is the next station Lexington?" she asked, quickly.

He looked deep into her eyes. "The next is Lexington," he said, slowly, and in a low voice. "After that a few moments' drive, and then—then we shall be at home!"

She turned her face to the window, and she did not speak again until the train, making its slow entrance, finally came to a standstill in the Union Station. She was vaguely conscious in the interim that Alfred, descending suddenly to mundane affairs, after that brief, impassioned glance, was attempting to tell her something of the part of the town they were approaching, and with true Kentucky instinct was enlightening her with respect to the "Town Fork of the Elkhorn" on which, he quoted, "in the year 1793 the first steamboat which ever successfully moved on any waters was exhibited."

She found herself listening with the imperfect attention with which one, toiling with one's own thoughts, attends to the prattle of a child; and it was a relief when reaching for her things on the seat before them he sprang up at last with a smothered, boyish exclamation of delight.

She followed him quickly down the aisle of the car in the wake of the lugubrious old woman in the black gown and veil who was pushing her young charges in front of her while she alternately reprimanded and directed them, the slim elegance and distinction of the tall figure in the long gray traveling cloak, the look of vitality, of swiftness and surety, as she stepped making a contrast with the slow, uncertain movement of the bent, shabbily dressed woman just in advance of her.

A few yards away from the entrance of the station a limousine was waiting, and as Alfred hurried her toward it, guiding her skillfully through the crowd, Evelyn heard the timid voice of the old woman speaking anxiously to one of the children at her side. "The colonel writ he'd send his nephew to show us where to stay till the nex' train ef he couldn't come hisself, but I don't see nobody."

Then immediately upon the querulous, half-frightened

words a voice sounded—calm, well-bred, and very kindly—a man's voice speaking soothingly, encouragingly, and in the tone of gentle authority that one might use with an old family servant; and at the sound of it Evelyn started and staggered a little, and an awful blackness fell upon her as of a sudden blindness, while something sharp and terrific like the seizure of a cruel hand seemed to grip her heart.

Alfred had helped her into the car and, unsuspecting, had darted away to give some special direction about the trunks before she dared turn her head. She was trembling piteously and the dim station in the twilight of the late summer day seemed a place of torture, with its shrieking cabmen and newsboys, its slow merciless clanging of bells as the engines moved to and fro. For a moment she sat perfectly still, her hands clasped in her lap, her face ashen as if the very blight of death had fallen upon it. An old blind man with his fiddle was playing near by, pausing now and then to hold his hat out to the passer by, and he caught and riveted her gaze just as the attention of the condemned criminal on the way to his execution is sometimes seized and held by some trivial object.

Presently she was aware through some subtle inner consciousness wholly apart from sight that the little group, after a brief colloquy, had arrived at a decision and was moving toward her. In a moment they would pass within a foot of where she was. Her heart was beating with a deep solemnity now; and there was in her ears a strange reverberation as of the slow tolling of a funeral knell. With a mighty effort of will she nerved herself for the ordeal, clutching desperately at the hope that possibly, possibly there was some mistake.

But there was no mistake. As the four drew nearer, the voice spoke again. A sharp shiver went through her, and then she slowly raised her eyes—to meet the cold, penetrating, half cynical gaze of Geoffrey Baylor, who bowed gravely and formally as he passed.

CHAPTER III

THE STEPS OF NEMESIS

It had all happened so quickly. For just a moment their footsteps had echoed, and then had been lost in the confused noises of the blatant streets. They had passed so silently—the strange group—like figures moving in pantomime. Were they real—the veiled, timorous old woman, with her doleful bleat subdued to quiet as she walked, an unhappy black sheep in an alien world; the two bright-faced little girls in blue and white checks, their mouths filled with chewing-gum, and their eyes roaming eagerly; the tall, grave man, with his still and awful demeanor, his haunting, humiliating scrutiny—were they real, or only phantoms conjured up by a wearied and overwrought brain? And was it also true, the wreck of faith, of hope, of manly strength and beauty she thought she saw in that single look, made known in an incredible space, as by a vivid lightning flash objects secret and terrible should be revealed? With the piercing anguish of an accusing conscience she sank back white and faint, crouching like a guilty thing against the cushions of the car.

Alfred's brisk and cheery voice as he sprang into the limousine sounded to her as if shouted from a great distance, and oddly unfamiliar. "Sorry to keep you waiting, dear, but some one met me—wanted to offer congratulations, and all that, and was telling me about a friend

of mine—Baylor, Geoffrey Baylor—who was also at the station and wanted to speak to me. Somehow I missed him, though. Did you happen to notice that grumpy old thing in a long black veil on the train? Baylor was here to look after her. She's the sister of the old house-keeper who for thirty years lived with his uncle and our nearest neighbor, and who died, I was just told, during my absence. By the way, I am eager to know what you will think of Baylor—you have such a keen, incisive sort of way of probing to the root of character."

"I have met him."

Were the words a mad, deafening shriek uttered by one delirious? She knew that she had spoken with thorough self-command, incidentally, and with, apparently, only the mild interest in the subject which courtesy would demand; yet to her own ears the simple sentence was a thrilling cry wrung from a heart tortured almost beyond endurance.

But he was busy tucking the light lap-robe about her skirts.

"Met him, have you?" he asked, as he raised his head. "How long ago?"

"Three years."

"Oh—three years! Then you may as well say that you don't know Baylor. The fellow's fearfully changed—so changed that the man of to-day and the man of three years ago are about as much alike as two diametrically opposed characters. I have known him always. His mother was a younger sister of old Colonel Douglas, the neighbor I mentioned—I'll point the place out to you when we get in sight of it, it is rather pretty—and Geoffrey, with his father and mother, and sometimes without them, has spent many summers there. However, it is rather due to my own skill as a meddler that he is

there at present. The colonel is a decidedly crotchety sort, and—”

“The uncle had become offended—and you, you interposed?”

She was hurrying the narrative now, and she was suddenly giving him an eager, almost breathless attention.

Young Merriweather, pleased to find that he had mentioned a subject that interested her, went on garrulously.

“Yes, it was, it was precisely like that. The old colonel, who is a keen one for taking matters in his own hands, proposed to Geof, just after Colonel Baylor’s colossal failure and death in New York, to come to Kentucky. The old fellow’s got quite a considerable estate, and he wanted to give the entire management of it over to Geoffrey, and he offered to make him his heir. Baylor declined. It angered the old gentleman to such a point that he refused to have his nephew’s name mentioned even in his presence—for nearly three years.”

He paused a moment, and seeing that she waited, took the story up where he had left off. “In the meantime, Geoffrey, like a second Chatterton, with that idiotic pride of his, and because of inexperience in business matters, was having hard lines in New York. His drama—you know he is a sort of poet fellow”—she shuddered—“his drama, on which he had staked all his hopes, had failed to find an appreciative public; the magazine on which he held a position was slowly, but surely going under; and worse of all, his health had completely gone to smash. When I discovered him at last—for I deliberately went after him, and refused to accept the hint that his long silences gave—I found him reduced to a state of actual want, and just barely alive after a long and serious illness of typhoid fever. Then you should

have seen me presenting his case to the old colonel! It was rich!"

"He—he relented?"

"Relented! Bless you, the old fellow broke down and cried! I began to fancy myself a born story teller. Not many people, I'll wager, ever saw Colonel Douglas moved to tears. It just broke me all up. But I accomplished what I went for; and the result was that the colonel took the next train for New York, and Geoffrey, too ill to make much resistance, was removed forcibly from his dismal quarters and brought to Kentucky. His proud spirit may chafe under the sense of dependence, but the colonel's got his grip on him, and he will hardly let him slip this time. He's pretty crotchety, though, and Geoffrey's got a will that is about as haughty and imperious as the old man's own. They're of the same blood."

They had driven rapidly through the town, and as the car passed through the crowded old-fashioned streets now and then an acquaintance gayly turned and bowed, Alfred returning the greeting with a beaming smile of boyish pride and good nature that was winning in its thorough transparency and lack of any attempt to hide his self-consciousness. There was a brief silence.

"How long has he been here?" she asked, presently, struggling with a strange tightening of the muscles of the throat that was giving a sudden hoarseness to her voice. Again Alfred was lifting his hat. He turned to her, a trifle absent-minded, the distraction of the moment having sent his thoughts off with characteristic agility into another direction altogether.

"How long—?" he asked, and paused, uncertain. "Oh, we were speaking of Baylor. He has not been here very

long, just a few months, but already, I am glad to see, he is looking better, very much better. Dear, I am so glad you take an interest in him, you are likely to see quite a good deal of him, I should say. He and Caroline are much together. She seems to be rousing old ambitions in him with that tremendous will of hers. I hear he is beginning to write again, and it is always a mighty good sign when a man goes back to his work—a man like Geoffrey. In my case,” he added, with a burst of laughter, “it wouldn’t mean quite so much; it would only mean that *The Eagle* had ceased to soar, and that those lazy fellows at the office had all gone off on a jag, and I simply had to buckle down.”

A curious pallor suddenly superseded the flush which for an instant had swept to her brow. She sank back a little hurriedly into her corner and half closed her eyes. They had reached the suburbs and he was about to point out some of the places when he all at once perceived the change in her.

“Darling, how ill and tired you look!” he cried, distressedly. “The day has been a little bit too much for you, I’m afraid. But we’ll be at home in less than five minutes now, and you can rest a while before dinner. There’ll be a good half hour. This place over here on the right is Colonel Douglas’s, dear, if you care to raise up and look at it—decidedly damp and gloomy-looking, with all those vines and trees, but picturesque rather, and—here, just here, you can get the first glimpse of your home. Lean a little toward me and look where I point. Don’t you see the white columns now? Dear, *please*,” as she fixed her eyes upon him, in a sort of bewilderment, yet did not stir, “I want you to see it from here.”

Slowly, obediently, she forced herself to comply at

last, and she sat up and looked steadily in the direction he indicated. For a moment she did not speak, and he waited eagerly. "I hope you are going to care for it," he said, thrilling a little under a sense of that deep love of the soil, particularly when in the presence of his ancestral acres, that every Kentuckian feels.

But the expression in her eyes was still painfully intense and withdrawn, as of one who gazing fixedly yet does not see.

"The place is very beautiful," she said, softly, at length, "and sometime when I am not so very, very tired—" She broke off suddenly and looked away. "I wish—I wish that you might take me all over it. But as soon as we get there I will rest for a little while, if I may—the heat has made my head ache so."

He bent over her anxiously, tenderly, wondering a little at the shiver that seemed to sweep through her.

"But surely you are not cold, darling?" he asked in alarm, feeling her trembling beneath his touch.

She roused herself with an effort. "No—no—I am not at all cold. Please do not bother. What—what a charming driveway! And you say your great-grandfather owned the place and handed it down to his descendants? How nice of him! Or better still of the rest of you to keep it, and not let it slip away from you in the usual shiftless Southern fashion."

She spoke rapidly, nervously, a sudden hectic again showing in her cheeks, as the car, after winding a quarter of a mile or more beneath beautiful forest trees finally drew up before one of those characteristic abodes of the Bluegrass whose solid substantiality and fine Grecian beauty have given an added distinction to the region, no less than an ideal of comfort and of symmetry which from generation to generation still continues to oppose itself

in quiet dignity to the cruder taste revealed in a newer and less reposeful architecture.

The great door, with its broad fanlight and picturesque leaded panes, was flung hospitably wide, while within the dim hall several dusky faces beneath snowy caps peered curiously, following with eager and envious interest the studied movements of the young butler who, with considerable pomposity of demeanor, intended to impress his fellow-servants, stood respectfully awaiting the descent of the occupants of the car, his black countenance expressing an amusing blending of gravity, born of a sense of his own importance, and barbaric inquisitiveness.

In the midst of Alfred's hilarious greeting to his servants, his bubbling, boyish overflow of joyous contentment, Evelyn walked and spoke and smiled, playing her little part with the flawless ease of one long schooled in the art of hiding her emotions, and of moving gracefully before an audience. But she had grown paler with each new effort; and as Alfred gayly bore her from room to room, locking his arm in hers, and compelling her to give an opinion upon the new furnishings, which he had ordered not without a certain nervous apprehension of the result of his selection, in spite of Caroline's endorsement, she suddenly staggered and caught at one of the high-backed Elizabethan chairs, while she turned a pleading face upon him.

He summoned Penelope immediately, breaking forth into profound apologies for his self-absorption and forgetfulness. As in a dream Evelyn heard him, her great brown eyes a little vague and wondering, while he gave certain directions for her comfort. Then, with a peculiar smile playing about her lips, and with a strange seriousness, she turned and gravely thanked him, moving an

instant afterwards slowly down the long hallway and on up the spiral stairs.

The rooms into which she was finally ushered by Penelope—who, in order that she might act as general supervisor, had filled her place in the kitchen temporarily by a professional cook of considerable renown, if a person, however, none the less secretly scorned by herself, and reluctantly resorted to—were a suite on the left of the upper hall. They were furnished with extreme thoughtfulness, yet with that delightful simplicity which marks the old Southern homes, and which seems always to suggest the rosemary and lavender of a bygone day through the association brought to mind by its quaint embellishment—a choice piece of old mahogany, maybe exquisitely carved, or something in cherry, preserved and handed down from a far-off past, with here and there a bit of brass or silver not unfrequently having a history that would make it to the relic hunter a thing of rare value.

The bed-chamber was naïvely and airily virginal, with its walls tinted a delicate rose, its white carved woodwork and its canopied bed draped in dotted muslin. There was a small round table in the center of the room littered with books and magazines, and there were several reproductions of pictures done by pre-Raphaelite artists, and on the high shelf of the mantel two or three beautiful pieces of china flanked by a pair of old brass candlesticks which were also duplicated on the little mahogany dressing-table and reflected in the oval-shaped mirror above it.

Evelyn stood with a curious hesitancy on the threshold. The strained look in her eyes had deepened, and there was a sharp twitching of the lips when she tried to speak in response to the soft purring voice at her elbow. She put up a hand and caught at a little fluttering lock of

hair, keeping her face turned. Her breath was coming strangely.

"Honey," Penelope was saying urgently, "I'm gwine push dat couch up long side de winder, an' I'm gwine shet de doo', an' pull down de blin's, an' I ain' gwine let *nobody* git in heah tell de big clock say hit's seven an' dinner's ready an' spilin'. De trunks done come, an' ef you'll jes gimme de keys I'll fetch you one dem outlandish things lak what Miss Ca'line put on when she plum wore out, an' I'll help you ondress, an' 'twon't be no time afore you're restin' easy, same ez ef you ain' niver thought 'bout gittin' mah'ied."

When the keys were finally produced, Penelope stood a moment, smiling down upon the beautiful spent figure drooping in the armchair near the table. All at once she broke forth into her odd, sonorous little whoop.

"Seem lak 'tain't no mo'n yistiddy sence me an' Mose done got mah'ied," she remarked, confidentially, "an' dat ole gray mule what he come ridin' on fell in de creek an' splash he weddin' close, an' he look so much lak ole Sat-an I 'lowed I wouldn't have nothin' 'tall to do wid him tell he say he gwin gimme a yaller bombazine an' a blue pa'sol an' a red shawl wid fringes on it; an' he say 'fo'long he wan' see me all dressed up in 'em an' then—then he say he wan' me go to church an' tak' de sacrament."

The vagaries of a bride being something that she was evidently fully prepared through personal experience to appreciate, Penelope manifested no alarm when the only recognition of this triumphant dénouement at the outset of her own matrimonial adventure was a blank, wholly uncomprehending stare, as if her words had fallen upon ears deaf to their meaning. Her round ebony countenance only sparkled the more with good humor and a sort of shy, indulgent teasing, as if she were concerning

herself with the whimsicalities of a child. Then, without more ado, she turned and moved with her smooth, cat-like tread across the room, disappearing behind the portière into the little ante-chamber beyond.

She was not long gone, her deft fingers having speedily found the objects sought, and she returned bearing a soft white silken garment with flowing laces, and a pair of light blue satin bedroom slippers, in which Evelyn soon found herself arrayed with a dexterity that bespoke Penelope's skill as a lady's maid. A moment afterward the couch at the foot of the bed was wheeled up to the open window to catch the cool late breeze, the blind was drawn, and Evelyn was alone.

When the door closed at last she sat up.

During the moment the negress had lingered to deliver her parting injunction about "de big clock on de staihs" Evelyn had lain passive, in seeming contentment, even managing to bestow one of her radiant smiles upon the waiting-woman and speaking a few words in the pleasant, winsome way she had with servants which almost invariably made them her willing slaves. But once Penelope's plump form had vanished, and the dim white room was freed of her babblings, the overcharged brain, hitherto too stunned by the shock to formulate with clearness the resolve it had been obscurely making since that awful moment at the station, once more was keenly alive, and toiling with the tremendous tragic complications which the situation involved.

For an instant her eyes roamed about the room with the wide, questioning look they had held when first she had entered it, as if, even yet, she was scarcely able to persuade herself that this was actually her bridal chamber; while her lips moved, faltered, but uttered no sound. She was trembling as in an ague; and as if addressing her-

self to a veritable human presence instead of the inanimate objects about her, she kept saying over and over in that painful, silent reiteration which combined the stress of both the pleader and the apologist, "But it is impossible—impossible—impossible!"

Then, all at once, her expression changed, and in the place of the tense, desperate look it had worn of one caged there came the sort of cunning and hint of maneuver which sometimes trace themselves upon the features of the insane when planning an escape.

From that moment, what had been previously scarcely more than a blindly urgent impulse became a fixed and definite determination. She must go. It was impossible that she should remain. No power, she insisted, of earth or heaven, making the contention in a rush of maddening emotion that caught her up and swept her on with the speed and the terror of the whirlwind, could make her Alfred's wife, now that spirit and mind and body refused him acquiescence. That one look into the face of the man to whom her whole being had once turned in joyful response, whom she believed she had deeply wronged, and who by the mere accusation of his presence had been able to arouse in her with redoubled power all the profundity of passion and of devotion that had formerly swayed her and made her completely his, had brought her not only to a stark and blighting realization of the thing which in her marriage she had done, but had rendered all thought of any other man in such relation as an unspeakable, humiliating desecration; so that her recent vows, the shame and sorrow of her young husband, the painful publicity which must follow upon the action she had planned, all—all were forgotten in the thought of her premeditated flight, which, somehow, sometime, and within the next few hours, must be accomplished.

The moral significance of the thing she was about to do, save as it concerned an unalterable instinct, an instinct that would seek to guard her from mere physical profanation, scarcely seemed to take hold of her as yet. Imperfectly only, if at all, at the moment, she was aware of the great fundamental facts which she had to deal with in trying her own case. Though knowing dimly that Geoffrey's part in the North Carolina drama was not the primary cause of her undoing, and admitting that her overthrow had had its source in some flaw or weakness in her own nature which had been developing through the period of years, she still heard but faintly the solemn shifting of the scenes which was to bring her face to face with Nemesis.

The course she was about to enter upon seemed to stand out untrammelled by the confusion of ethics, and to present itself to her wild, undisciplined, and scarcely analytical temperament on thoroughly simple lines. Had Geoffrey appeared to her, as he did at the station, five minutes before she had become Alfred's wife, and there had awakened within her the same sense of vast and infinite things that she had then felt, and that had borne down upon her with the recognition of his tremendous power—a power that she was able neither to ignore nor to defy, and that was strong enough to subdue her with a look—in such case, assuredly, she argued, she would have asked her release. Even now, with the binding words of her marriage vows still but on her lips, she felt that she must ask for it. Great as was the wrong she was about to do her young husband, it seemed to her a greater one by far to remain with him as his wife while her every nerve and fiber throbbed with a hopeless love for another man.

Geoffrey's feeling toward herself, whatever that might

wildered, only to sink back an instant afterward in a horrified and helpless confusion. The old clock outside was gravely striking the hour. "Seven!" she counted, aghast. It was incredible, unless—unless she had fallen asleep. It was only a little after six when she lay down, with this awful thing confronting her. How could the moments have slipped?

All at once, as she pushed back in a dazed fashion the heavy hair about her temples, trying to collect herself, an icy numbness seemed to seize upon her heart. There was the stirring of footsteps in the adjoining room—a man's footsteps, trying to move noiselessly, and failing signally.

She quickly closed her eyes, feigning sleep, for there had come a light knock, followed by the sound of her name. A moment afterward the silken portière on the opposite side of the room trembled—and some one entered.

He paused an instant, with the shy, wistful hesitation which sometimes takes possession of the more sensitive and self-accusing soul on the threshold of a sanctuary. Then he moved across the room on tiptoe, coming quickly to her side, and when he had reached the couch he sank down on his knees beside it.

There was a moment's silence in which she could feel his breath against her cheek, before he uttered a few smothered words that fell upon her ears like a caress. But he seemed loth to wake her; and in an agony she prayed that he might not kiss her, touch her even, as she lay white and still as if death were the bridegroom that had come to claim her, and all other contact save his were a desecration.

She knew that his eyes were fixed upon her face, studying her every lineament with the rapture of a lover, yet she managed to keep her lids peacefully closed and to

breathe slowly and evenly through what seemed to be an interminable period. After the first moment, and when he still forbore to snatch her into his arms, conquering an evident impulse, a wild hope sprang up in her heart that he would leave her to herself for just a few moments longer, and not attempt to rouse her.

Perhaps it was the intensity of her shrinking as well as an augustness in her whiteness and purity that seemed to render her at the moment a being robbed of all earthliness—something that touched a chord of reverence in his boy's heart and held him abashed and motionless before her. At all events, the thing she longed for came to pass. For an instant he leaned over her until his lips almost touched her brow. There was a single whispered word, so faintly uttered that it was scarcely louder than the sound of his breathing against her cheek. Then the suspense was abruptly ended, and she knew that he had risen and was moving softly from the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY OF MADNESS

It was eight o'clock and after.

For a full half hour the pleasantly shaded lamps in the drawing-room had been burning gayly; and in the great dining-room beyond, decked like a banqueting-hall, the round table in the center of the room had glowed in the rosy illumination of candles that had almost as long been lighted; but still the mistress of the feast lingered above stairs, while below her young husband amiably chafed and wondered.

Evelyn's sudden vanquishment by fatigue—an occurrence so unusual that he could not recall having ever before seen her even a little tired, in spite of the very arduous and long-continued exertion which the two had sometimes delighted in taking together—was giving him considerable concern. And it was with a mingled sense of alarm and of proud protection that he paced restlessly up and down the long drawing-room, a slim and very youthful figure in his evening clothes, pausing now and then anxiously to listen for the longed-for sound of her footsteps, or to throw a quick glance in the direction of the big decorated dining-room to make sure that the appointments were in every way elegant and satisfying.

His taste, slightly bordering upon the fastidious, had been in all the house carried out in every detail, and he felt she could not fail to be pleased, particularly with respect to certain minor evidences of his thoughtfulness

by means of which he had sought in the graceful refurbishing of the abode agreeably to catch her fancy. He laughed whimsically at the thought that his brief acquaintance with her scarcely justified any surety of knowledge in relation to her own specific likings and preferences. He only knew that there was about her at all times something fine and exquisite and pervasive like the aroma of certain plants—something which made itself felt the moment one entered her presence and compelled him to offer her his very highest whether of spiritual or material things. Her culture and thorough enlightenment were things which made particular appeal to his aristocratic, if somewhat untrained perception.

But the strange languor had made her seem oddly unenthusiastic toward his efforts thus far; and he waited eagerly, hopeful that the hour's rest she had had should have restored her to her usual aliveness to all about her. He could not quite picture that lovely face as ill or sad; yet there had been, assuredly, something oddly unfamiliar in her aspect when on the homeward drive he had attempted to get her attention; and she had seemed equally indifferent to his beloved bluegrass and the picturesque old home he had so greatly desired that she might care for.

The death-like pallor he had noted as he bent above her in her bed-chamber had smote him with the violence of an acute shock, rousing him to the realization of a startling possibility. Could it be that anything so flawless, so exquisite, could actually sicken and, maybe, some day—die? The idea had stirred him to a tenderness unutterable, while it had also filled him with a nameless dread: the thought of blight, of disaster, of horrible things.

He was by nature so distinctly light-hearted, so little given to contemplation of a morbid kind that the painful

foreboding which possessed him was in the way of an altogether new experience, and he asked himself with dismay if his nerves were possibly becoming unstrung. But he could not recall ever having had a day's illness in his life, and though scarcely robust, he was of that wiry, exuberant temperament whose mere vitality and hopefulness are a continual source of health; so that, on this day of days, he should for the first time have thought of death as a contingency in relation to her seemed an appalling prognostication before which his whole being drew back in recoil, and with a vague sense of something as remote and as incongruous as would be such feeling to the god Pan gayly roaming wood and field, and piping to the shepherd lads.

He was about to ring, still under the influence of a most unwelcome emotion, and he had thought to dispatch a servant with a message of inquiry, when he turned suddenly and beheld her standing in the doorway. She was rather elaborately gowned in pink satin and chiffon, and her neck above the low bodice sparkled in jewels. Jewels also gleamed amid the coils of her brown hair and on her bare arms.

An exclamation of surprise and pleasure broke from him, and he hurried toward her, his eyes paying tribute. "Darling, all this elegance just for me!" he cried. And then, all at once, he paused, studying her in a sort of troubled uncertainty, his eyes wandering from her gown to her face. Again he was struck by something singular in her appearance—something which arrested and held him spellbound.

She stood an instant on the threshold without speaking, breathing quickly, and grasping the green damask portière. But as she waited, the strained excitement of her features gave place to another look even more difficult to

him to fathom, and he felt she was gazing at him with an expression so deep and earnest as to make her forgetful of all else save a single, dominant feeling.

In truth for the moment, in the relief which had come to her through the clear plan of escape she had been able to make during the brief respite she had had while dressing, there was mingled a pity so profound for the sorrow she was about to inflict that the words she would have spoken trembled upon her lips and would not be uttered.

As she stood thus gazing into his face, his extreme boyishness and his trustfulness of her pierced her like the well-aimed thrust of a spear. But in an instant she had recovered herself. Once more the old frenzy was upon her. Her heart was beating with a solemn pounding. She must not pause to think throughout the ordeal which was before her, else by some blundering she should fail.

This dinner—their wedding festival—should be the complete and blithesome thing he had planned, unmarred by any suspicion of the desperation which was urging her onward. In the madness which surged in her overcharged brain there was no thought of the ironic cruelty of her action. She was incapable of anything approaching a wide perspective. She meant only to delay the blow a little longer, and then—her flight and his desolation, both of which seemed to her a dispensation sternly dealt out by the hand of destiny and not to be gainsaid, while she felt herself borne irresistibly along by the racing current which would soon hurl her helpless into the rapids.

She moved a step or two forward, and then slowly and softly smiled, thus breaking the curious spell which had held them both transfixed, immovable, and silent. He drew a deep breath, and his laugh rang out with a spasmodic attempt at the old mirthful *abandon*.

"I—I had half persuaded myself that you had been spirited away," he stammered, checking a more ardent expression at sight of the negro butler just appearing in the doorway.

She walked with lowered eyes by his side down the length of the drawing-room. For a moment she did not answer. Then she smiled again, this time with a sort of dazzling remoteness, as she raised her face to his, and with the faintest possible hiatus answered,

"No, I am with you—yet."

They were on the threshold of the softly lighted dining-room. He turned quickly toward her. "Now—and always," he whispered, under his breath.

She moved silently toward the table, taking the chair which was drawn back for her without a word, so that he almost doubted that she had heard. But a moment afterward he was sitting rapt and delighted before the return of that radiant charm which from the first moment of his acquaintance with her had accomplished his thralldom.

In truth, she was never more resplendent. Her conversation, like her features, scintillated with an irresistible variety that kept the attention alert and quivering with anticipation. He could scarcely take his eyes from her. He thought he had never seen her so lovely, so enchanting, and intellectually so brilliant; and he turned dazed and a trifle impatient to hear what the butler was trying to say to him at the end of the third course. It seemed there had been a telephone message.

The negro mumbled and expressed himself with considerable hesitation, but explained that the call was urgent.

Alfred's slender blonde face reflected a slight annoy-

ance. "But didn't you say that we are at dinner?" he asked, surprised at the man's persistence. "Who is it that wants me?"

The negro threw a furtive glance in the direction of the beautiful, happy lady on the opposite side of the table, and his black countenance looked grave. "Hit's from Woodford, sir," he said, ominously.

Alfred sprang up, suddenly paling. His eyes, filled with a speechless alarm, met Evelyn's comprehending gaze for an instant, and then faltered. A moment afterward he had rushed headlong from the room.

He was gone a long time.

For five minutes Evelyn sat staring at her untouched plate, with hands tightly clasped and with bowed head. Then suddenly she rose and began to move up and down the great flower-scented room, unable to endure the tremendous nerve tension upon her in quietude any longer.

The room seemed all at once to have become hot and oppressive. The odor of food on the table, of meats and fruits and jellies, filled her with a sickening sense of loathing. There was a sound of hurrying footsteps once past the door, then everything had become strangely quiet.

Her breath was short and painful almost to the point of suffocation. She had made her way to the window and was leaning far out into the cool night air when the sound of a motor-car fell upon her ears. An instant afterward Alfred entered the room. He came straight to her side.

His boyish face was ashen, and his lips twitched in the effort to speak. He stood silent a moment, stricken and dumbfounded.

"Your father!" she said, quickly, and in a hushed voice.

He bowed his head. "It seems he has been steadily growing worse since yesterday. They hated to tell me.

To-night there came a bad turn. The local doctor has asked for a consultation, and I am to take three physicians from town with me in the motor-car. There is—there is very little hope.”

She stood very still before him, unable to speak a word. In place of the consuming heat of the moment before there had come the sensation of being suddenly encased in ice. He was so youthful, and so plainly remorseful in his sorrow, she wondered why she could find nothing to say to him when he finally blurted out his blame of himself for not listening to her proposal to delay the wedding. She could only wait with her dark eyes upon his face in a mute, fascinated stare, while his whole frame quivered and shook under the stress of his emotion. And it seemed to her only a natural part of the exquisite torture of the moment that even in the midst of witnessing his sorrow and self-accusation the thought should have come to her that with such a temperament as Alfred's grief must necessarily be short-lived. As if the very fountains of her sympathy had become congealed she found herself unable to soothe or comfort, even though painfully striving against the terrifying hardness which was making her seem a being monstrous and inhuman to herself.

But he was speaking again in great haste, disjointly, nervously, and his white face had abruptly taken on an unusual manliness of expression as he gave a few parting, needful directions. She heard him as in a dream. Then she felt his breath against her lips and his arms about her as they clasped her for an instant tenderly and ardently.

“Darling,” he whispered, “it is terrible to have to leave you like this, but you must not worry, and you must try to get a little sleep, you look so pale and tired. Don't sit up for me, and don't expect me before late in the

night—God only knows what is before me—and, dear, my beloved, good-by!”

He was gone. The last sound of his motor-car as it rushed through the darkness had died away, and she was alone. She stood a moment on the doorstep, to which she had followed him when he hurried from the dining-room, and looked with a fixed and awed gaze down the moonlit winding road, along which she expected soon to pass, conscious of that curious sense of moral support and assistance through circumstances which often comes to one when all minor events seem conspiring to enable him easily to execute the course intended to follow upon a tremendous, daring decision.

The wave of profound pity, stilled in his presence, but which suddenly swept over her at recollection of his aghast, misery-haunted countenance, seemed but a part of the ancient, world-old sorrow that soon or late all must know. And she yielded herself to it with a feeling of maternal tenderness that could afford to expend itself with all lavishness now that no wifely duties were ever to be required of her.

Not that Alfred's unforeseen departure had really altered anything. It had merely simplified matters—made it a trifle less difficult for her to follow the leadings of that powerful and all-compelling instinct which had sprung to life in her, and which never for an instant had permitted her to falter. The motives which in such conditions would be inclined to control with women of weaker fiber than hers, or of other moral perceptions, had scarcely presented themselves to her. One single, unwavering purpose had swept her onward, and like an atom driven by a mighty wind she had surrendered herself to it wholly, without fear and without hesitation.

During the time of delay before dinner she had made

all necessary arrangement and preparation. Finding that there was a telephone in her dressing-room, she had discovered by the use of it that the train she wished to take would leave about half-past ten of that evening; and she had meant to slip away cautiously at an opportune moment, making some excuse to Alfred that would take her to her room when the servants should be at table. Her plan was to go at once to North Carolina, to the quaint little old lady who once before had befriended her when driven by one of those secret imperative impulses of the soul she was prone to, and who assuredly now, she believed—although doubtless not without certain misgivings—would receive and pity her, both because of her great need, and for the sake of the long-dead sister to whom not only in feature but in fortune the Evelyn of to-day bore so strange a resemblance.

As she stood thus, her thoughts toiling with past and future, and oblivious of the present, all at once something that she had once spoken of the Evelyn of long ago flashed into her mind, and she saw again the pretty breakfast-room in her great-aunt's home and recalled her own words, as she and Mrs. Chisholm had sat together on the first morning after her arrival. "Her sorrow," she had said, "terrible and pitiful as it was, was really only of her own making. If only she had been true to the memory of the man she loved, everything would have been different with her. Her unhappiness was only a consequence of her own act of disloyalty and shame—a law working logically to its own end; and the end of all such disregard of one's finer nature is inevitably death—a spiritual death, one must believe."

How the words smote and cut her! She stood guilty and cowering before their startling menace. What hideous retrogression in character, she asked herself

quickly, had led her to defy that old eternal truth? Yet even in the midst of her self-questioning, her wild nature, fully aroused to the horror of her situation, but temporarily dormant to the deeper significance of pain, sought refuge in a natural human impulse—the desire to escape from suffering at any cost.

Was that other Evelyn a better or a worse woman than herself, she pondered gravely, that she could endure marriage—after realizing her fatal blunder—with one man while loving another? For herself, she argued, at all events, the thing was impossible; and presently she turned and went quickly up the stairs, first speaking a word or two to the servant who had come to ask if she would not return to the dining-room. And once more there was that violent pounding in her brain, that sense of persistent urging which would admit of no dispute, no doubting.

There was need of haste. The clock on the stairs was on the point of striking nine, and by ten she must be safely out of the house. The station, fortunately for her, was on the outskirts of the town and not far away. By walking rapidly she could reach the street car line in fifteen minutes, and from thence to the station whence she should leave would not require more than five minutes of the precious time, so that she could readily accomplish all that she wished to do in the interim, if she did not loiter.

She had thought in her first calculations to leave only a note of a few words to Alfred, meaning to write later from North Carolina, but now there would be opportunity for a somewhat longer explanation.

The lights in her bed-chamber were burning softly, and the great white room smote upon her senses with a painful solemnity as she thus entered it. There was a desk

in one corner. She sat down before it and gathered up pen and paper, the candles in a sconce just above her head making a playful shimmering on her bronze hair and on her pale rose gown.

Her hand hesitated a moment and then moved with a firm rapidity over the pages, her thoughts crowding upon her, clamoring for expression, and taking on a peculiar form and freedom as if the product of an over-heated imagination or of a brain stimulated to extreme activity by some intoxicating drug.

The letter was a very human document, delicate, proud, picturesque in its brilliance and in its naïve directness; and in spite of its apparent self-absorption, it rang true. It was a plea for forgiveness, for mercy, touching in its intensity of appeal, its resistless tide of emotion, and in its spontaneous loveliness. In her complete unconsciousness she had written like one inspired, telling her story in language at times symbolic, or obscure, yet making the facts stand out bold and clear while her heart bowed before its confessional, and made known in contrite spirit its tragedy of a deep and unforgettable love. Her separation from her lover, brought about through her own unreasoning jealousy of the unknown woman who had suddenly crossed her path; her belief in the success of her attempt to quiet the old feeling and to find happiness in the marriage she had just entered into; and finally the hideous and unimagined horror which had come upon her on this her wedding-day through the acute realization she had had—all, without being told in actual words, was made to live for him in letters of flame, whose very solemnity and sincerity seemed to command for themselves respect.

After she had finished it, she rose with a great quietude upon her. A wide, almost vacant stare showed in

the brown eyes, and she stood a moment collecting herself. Then she undressed speedily, and got herself into a dark traveling gown with hat and veil that she took from a closet together with her traveling bag she had placed there several hours earlier. All her trunks were locked, and ready to be sent to her. She threw a slow glance about the apartment, and then passed quietly into the room adjoining her own which she knew to be Alfred's.

She paused an instant on the threshold, dimly conscious of the room's heavy antique furniture, and of its contrast to the one prepared for her, and then moved quickly toward a table in the center crowded with newspapers, books, pamphlets, and also sundry masculine appurtenances of which his pipe was the special object which caught her eye.

She reflected a moment and finally put the letter down beside it, saying to herself with a wan little fluttering smile of pity, "But he will come back surely to this for consolation, and he will find it here." Then something made her take the letter from its envelope and read it from the beginning.

She had come to the last page when she was startled by a long violent ringing of the telephone bell resounding with imperative demand throughout the silent house.

CHAPTER V

A TRAGIC SEQUENCE

SHE hastened into the dressing-room and grasped the receiver, her face expressing at once the recoil of personal dread and a large unselfishness of feeling born of her sympathetic concern. In her expectation of a dire message from Alfred relating to his father, her mind in anticipation had already leaped to a conclusion as to the purport of the summons; and so confident was she that it would be Alfred's voice she should hear that her countenance altered with swift surprise at the first inquiry which was put to her.

Assuredly the person speaking was not Alfred, and she replied formally, and with a sudden stirring of ironic humor as she made acknowledgment of her identity. For an instant the impulse to break forth into peals of immoderate laughter assailed her, but she checked the spasm of hysteria, and assented slowly and distinctly.

"I am Mrs. Merriweather."

There was a slight pause—a barely perceptible hesitation—and she waited, restless under the delay, her every nerve and fiber tingling with a desire to be off and away. Then the voice spoke again. It was a man's voice, quiet, controlled, yet revealing a self-command that was the evident result of effort, an extreme and almost fatherly gentleness showing in the apparent desire to spare her as far as possible from something painful in the communication about to be made.

"It is Dr. Beverley who is speaking to you, Mrs. Merriweather," the voice said, as in immediate confirmation.

Again she waited. Why—why was he so slow? A little more and she would surely miss her train.

"Yes—yes, I am listening, Dr.—Dr. Beverley," she answered, quickly. "You have something to say to me?"

The man at the other end went straight to the point, and with a certain deliberateness that showed his forethought and his power. But he had scarcely more than begun when suddenly she staggered and fell back. Alfred—an accident—the motor-car—! Her whirling brain caught up the words and tossed them to and fro, scarcely comprehending, while the steady voice went on.

But the man was very patient. Slowly and positively he repeated what he had said, but in a tone of authority that seemed even in spite of the distance to grasp her nerves and sternly command them to be still.

The terse sentences followed each other with automatic precision. The accident had occurred just outside of town. It was caused by the failure of the steering gear to work at a curve in the road. They were moving at a rapid rate of speed, and the machine had careened and fallen down a short embankment. One of the party had been killed outright. Alfred's injuries were serious. There had been but little delay. An ambulance had been sent for. Dr. Beverley was telephoning from town. Mr. Merriweather would be brought home immediately.

Then followed a few brief directions almost curtly given. The great gentleness which at first had impressed her had all gone out of the strong voice. Powerful and resolute, it sought to steady her by diverting her thoughts from any present contemplation of the horror which had come upon her by requiring something instantly of her—something that must be done, and that she could do.

With a calm that was like the swift descent of an absolute blankness, making her in the sudden numbness which followed upon it strangely obtuse to all feeling, Evelyn heard and answered. An instant afterward the conversation was abruptly ended, and she put up the receiver.

She remained perfectly still for a moment, staring, yet seeing naught, and strangely weary. The temptation to yield to the unconsciousness which was stealing over her seemed an almost irresistible one, but she fought it down. Beyond the necessity for such effort she was unable to look. An instinctive fear of thought, of the smallest endeavor, held her white and immovable as if suddenly petrified, a single emotion showing in her carved countenance—the emotion of awful wonder.

As she stood thus her eyes presently fell upon the envelope and sheet of writing-paper which she still held in her hand. Slowly and mechanically, unmindful of the fact that she was destroying only a small portion of the letter she had meant to leave behind for Alfred, the remainder having been dropped in her haste on the table in his room when she fled at the sharp ringing of the telephone bell, she began to tear into little bits the pieces she held, the particles falling from her hands like tiny flakes of snow.

Just what the action symbolized she was scarcely in a mental condition to consider. An imperfect realization of the idea that she was being suddenly arrested—thwarted by the very hand of destiny and rendered powerless to carry out her plan of escape—was filling her with a startling confusion that all at once gave way in the presence of the piteous reality of another's suffering, and diverted her thoughts from herself.

Poor Alfred—poor boy—oh, how *horrible!* she began

to say over and over to herself, too stunned to think clearly, yet conscious of a swift rush of feeling that brought tears to her eyes.

But all at once she awoke to the necessity of action. She must summon the servants immediately. Already that dread, hearse-like carriage bearing its maimed and suffering occupant might be at the very gate. At this hour, she feared, the several negro men employed upon the place would be either asleep or off on one of their frequent nightly larks, so that she could not depend upon their services, if they should be needed, with any degree of certainty, until investigations were made. Penelope and "dat wall-eyed Viney," as the young mulatto girl, her assistant, had been designated when the former had been giving to the young bride repeated assurances of safety, slept in the third story of the house, but the other servants, she had been told, were domiciled in quarters not far away from the garden.

Evelyn's brain, a moment before so sluggish, was now keenly alive and valiant. In a flash she decided upon what she must do. She would speedily inform Penelope, imparting her intelligence as quietly as possible in order to prevent that harrowing outbreak of unrestrained lamentation which her knowledge of the darkey character led her to expect, and to wish as far as possible to avoid; then she would give directions with respect to a certain arrangement of Alfred's bedroom, and while Penelope and Viney were attending to this, she would turn on the lights and awaken the other servants.

As she turned, suddenly she caught sight of herself reflected in the opposite mirrored wall, and for an instant was startled, as by the sight of a stranger, at the tall figure dressed for traveling that met her eyes. Quickly

she tore off the dark hat and veil, flung her bag into a closet, and with her long loose cloak still about her, sped from the room, down the dim hallway, and on up the flight of stairs leading into the third story. In three minutes afterward, refusing to pause either for discussion or for the condolence with which, in barbaric abandon, Penelope's own grief had sought to assuage that of the young wife, she was down the stairs and out into the night, moving rapidly in the direction of the servants' quarters.

The moon was still shining, and the earth in its silvery radiance stretched a fair and peaceful prospect before her eyes. The great white-pillared house, the rows upon rows of August lilies on the terrace, the odor of moon-flower and of jasmine—all made upon her a piercing impression of loveliness that sank cruelly into her tortured heart. Her breath as she ran was coming torn as by sobs and seemed to reëcho the soft sighing among the pines and cedars which grew in the rear of the building. Her knees were trembling so that once she stumbled and fell. Her eyes were blinded with tears.

The sound of a banjo and of a plaintive negro voice coming from a member of a group in front of one of the cabins directed her footsteps. But she came up unheeded, and there was a general gasp of terror when Jerry, the young negro butler, who had been entertaining the crowd with his skill as a musician, turned, and, confronting her, suddenly broke forth with the exclamation, "Gawd, miss, ef I ain' done took you foh a sperrit!"

Once more she explained, gave her orders, and retraced her steps, moving onward in her dark cloak and with her white, strange face like a veritable phantom of the night driven by an unhappy wind. Her eyes were bent always

on the ground, and with that deep indrawn gaze which, blind to all outward objects, indicated a profound isolation of spirit or an intense mental abstraction. She did not pause, save for an instant while she slipped her arms mechanically from the long loose garment she wore and flung it in a chair on the upper landing, until she reached Alfred's bedroom.

On the threshold of the room she paused and threw an absorbed, cursory glance within. Everything, apparently, was in readiness. Penelope's thoughtful efficiency, aided by the dull and clumsy ministrations of the young mulatto girl, had in the meantime accomplished much. The room had an air of coolness and freshness. All useless furniture had been removed. The table in the center of the apartment, a few moments before overcrowded with its confusion of newspapers, books, pipes, cigarette stand, and reading lamp, now stood bared of everything save a broad strip of linen, thus giving the needed space for whatever painful objects occasion should require to be placed there, and suggesting to Evelyn's mind the thought of a contrast that sent a shiver through her frame.

There was nowhere a trace of that portion of the letter which had unconsciously slipped from her hand at the sudden and violent ringing of the telephone bell. So sure was she that she had destroyed the whole of what she had written that it did not occur to her to question the servants concerning it; and as a matter of fact they were both absent, having hurried down below at the first intimation of motors moving slowly up the long avenue.

Evelyn turned and with bowed head went down the stairs. In the hall the servants were huddled together, their faces expressing that curious admixture of rude sympathy and pleased excitement which possesses the

negro at the prospect of witnessing any of the details in connection with one of the distressing or calamitous events that may have overtaken a fellow mortal. The great hall door was flung wide—just as it had been but a few hours earlier to await the joyous arrival of the young master with his bride, when their dark, kindly faces had expressed only a gaping, wide-eyed curiosity supplemented by a childlike delight.

Outside there was a steady sound approaching along the gravel road. Then there followed upon the painful tension a momentary break. Someone leaned out of a car and gave a few brief directions, while the chauffeur of the foremost machine halted. The procession paused an instant, and again moved forward, drawing up at last beside the curbing. An instant afterward a stout, elderly gentleman sprang from the motor next to the ambulance, and moved quickly up the steps and on into the hall. He came straight to Evelyn and took both of her hands in his.

"My child," he said, very gently, waiving aside the formalities, and letting his gaze for an instant rest upon her with an intensity of concentration that seemed striving to penetrate the lovely veil of flesh and to seek the soul of the woman beneath, "I must ask you to aid us by making a great sacrifice. We wish you to go into the library and remain there. Later I will come and speak to you. Believe me, it is best that he should not see you. You will not be needed. We have two competent nurses with us. I must ask you to be strong—and to wait."

Evelyn slowly raised her eyes to his. "Is it very serious?" she asked, her lids faltering a little under his prolonged scrutiny.

Dr. Beverley did not remove his eyes. "It is as I told

you by telephone," he replied, briefly; "the case is—
serious."

Then he led the way toward the library, stood back
as she entered it, and softly closed the door upon her.

CHAPTER VI

A BOND OF FATE

It was nearly four hours later when Evelyn, sitting crouching in her dark gown in a far corner of the big lonely library, heard a door above stairs open softly and a man's voice on the landing shortly afterward speaking in muffled tones to one of the nurses in attendance. The other three surgeons had just gone, and only Dr. Beverley remained, she had been told by the servant sent to explain concerning the long delayed conference. During all that soul-racking time of waiting no one, apparently, had found a moment in which it had been possible to speak to her.

The odor of ether in the house, the sound of subdued steps and voices, a sense of something terrible and imminent, had filled her with a sickening horror out of which her courageous spirit, denied the relief of service and flung back upon itself, had arrived at last at a sort of vantage-ground through the medium of intense prolonged thought. She had obeyed the instructions given her to the letter, and she had not even once risen from the chair into which she had sunk on entering the library. A strange sternness with herself had forced her into a state of quietude.

From the moment when at the solemn sound of slow-moving persons passing the door bearing their piteous burden she had covered her face with her hands, striving to shut out from her eyes the scene her imagination

pictured, ceaselessly Alfred's maimed and possibly mangled form on its stretcher had continued to come before her and confront her; and she had cowered in its presence like a criminal. Not once had she felt the disposition to defy the command which had been given her and present herself at his bedside. A realization of guilt, awful in its sweep and in its magnitude, was upon her, while her thoughts, grappling with the deep things of the spirit, involved her in a turmoil of reasoning in which but one thing stood out distinct and clear: her own blind selfish action in sacrificing him in her mad and utterly futile reach for happiness.

In the light of this sudden comprehension her marriage to Alfred seemed the very extreme of cruelty, a wrong out of which the present catastrophe had come, and one for which, in her first ardor of self-condemnation, she confessedly held herself to be responsible.

Only tragic consequences to herself she now believed could have followed upon that fatal blunder she had made. With respect to her premeditated flight and the instinct which had guided her, even in the midst of her profoundest scourging she could permit herself no sort of wavering. But a new law of life, with thorough practicality, was working itself out in her suddenly aroused conscience, and she was beginning to discern, as see all awakening souls who have inconsiderately followed the bent of their own wills, that the individual is intimately bound to his fellows in all human relations, and so cannot fulfill his own self-centered desires without involving others in the ruin he has brought upon himself.

Thus, through a startling recognition of a broad principle—the suffering of the innocent as a consequence of the act of the guilty—she lost in her unsparing condemnation something in the way of a true perspective in

relation to the case; and in taking upon herself the primal sin, and acknowledging it, she was unable to free herself in her bewilderment of the thought that she was as guilty in relation to the calamity which had so swiftly followed as if she herself had deliberately planned and executed it.

The sound of a heavy step moving ponderously down the stairway summoned her valiant spirit to the ordeal before her with something of the humble dignity with which a confessed malefactor stands to receive his sentence. She was very calm. Though the color had fled from her face, her eyes were clear and luminous, and she moved with her old surety, to which a new grace had been added, across the room and flung the door wide before Dr. Beverley's hand had touched the knob.

"You are very kind," she said, softly, "to wait to speak to me."

Dr. Beverley moved without replying into the center of the room. With a certain old-time gallantry he pushed a chair forward and bowed gravely, motioning her to be seated. Then he himself sat down, and once more she felt those keen but kindly eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles bent upon her with a scrutiny that seemed to penetrate to the innermost recesses of her being. He was a short, stout man, with a smooth face, a sparsely covered head, and a certain eccentricity of dress and manner that at first belied the extraordinary power which lurked behind his comicality—a power that nevertheless speedily made itself felt despite the impression made by the loose baggy trousers, soft silk tie, and broad-brimmed hat which had long made of him a unique but well-beloved figure on the streets of the old Southern town. As he sat studying the beautiful, graceful woman before him, his gray eyes sympathetic yet alert and curious,

there was small hint of the irascibility which sometimes made of him a very difficult being to thwart when once his directions had been curtly given.

Presently he spoke, and his voice broke under its weight of feeling.

"Let me thank *you*," he said, "for the patience you have shown. Believe me, this is the first moment when I could come to you."

That he was dealing with a woman of exceptional quality, one strong to endure, but of an extreme pride and delicacy, as well as a reserve that would wrap her as in a queenly garment in its sure defenses, his own inherent highbreeding and that keen intuitive perception which enabled him to lay bare not only the bodies but the souls of his patients, had made him quick to recognize. Though he realized that he had been and was still keeping her on the rack in the delay of making known to her the full measure of her sorrow, yet he saw with feelings of instinctive respect that she did not quail but with a self-control that struck him as something rare and admirable waited until he should speak again.

But it was not altogether easy for him to do this. A touch of romance in his composition that made the situation of the young wife peculiarly appealing to him held him for an instant longer silent, while a tear trickled slowly down his cheek and fell with a moist splash upon his hands.

A sudden violent fit of coughing covered his embarrassment, and during the time that he was restoring his handkerchief—a huge affair almost as big as a tablecloth—to his pocket, Evelyn felt a thought pierce her that was like a stab.

"Have you come to tell me that he is dying—*dying*?" she asked, quickly and almost abruptly.

Dr. Beverley shook his head slowly. For an instant he met her eyes, and as if once more measuring the power of the woman to feel and to endure, he hesitated a fraction of a moment.

"No," he answered, slowly, "he is not dying—he will not die. At least there is nothing in the near future to be feared. He is not"—the strong voice grew hoarse with emotion and the hand on the arm of his chair shook visibly—"he is not in peril of his life—God knows I could wish he were. Pardon me," he added, quickly, "but I have always loved the boy."

She looked at him strangely. "You mean—?"

"I mean that his injuries are not of a kind to prove immediately fatal. He may live for years—an indefinite period—in his present condition."

She was breathing quickly. Her eyes, filled with a nameless horror, were riveted on his face. Her hands were tightly clenched. Suddenly she leaned forward in her low chair.

"There is no hope that he will ever be a strong man again?"

Dr. Beverley looked pityingly down upon the wild, upturned face, and was struck with its tragical loveliness. All at once he nerved himself, and the blow was one straight from the shoulder.

"There is no hope that he will ever walk or stand on his feet again."

She drew back as if he had struck her. For a moment the horror in her eyes deepened, while her brain reeled and staggered under the communication he had made.

Alfred!—Alfred, with his irresponsible, faun-like nature, his love of the woods and the fields, his delight in freedom and all outdoor sports, his shrinking from death and disease, his exuberant joy of life that steadily re-

fused to dwell upon anything relating to the serious side of existence! It seemed a thing incredible that he should be brought thus low, and she sat staring into the deeply troubled countenance before her, ashen but inarticulate.

Then there came all at once another expression into her eyes—one that Dr. Beverley could not fathom.

Under his gaze the delicate lids faltered and drooped. The hands in her lap shook convulsively, and then grew more tense. With instinctive delicacy he forbore to look at her, but he knew that her breath was coming faster, more frantic and sob-like. When she spoke again, however, her voice sounded strange and very distant.

"Will you tell me the nature of his injuries?" she asked.

"It is a case of partial paralysis."

For a long time she was silent. Then, once more, she raised her eyes to his, facing him with a sort of defiance.

"And that means—?"

Dr. Beverley's glance turned watchfully upon her for an instant, and again his thrust was unsparing.

"That means," he answered, in grim, measured tones, the words falling from his lips like clods upon a coffin, "that means—death in life—in other words, that he is to be a helpless and hopeless paralytic all his days."

PART III
THE DANCE OF PLASTIC
CIRCUMSTANCE

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CHAPTER I

ELAINE AND GUINEVERE

"I HAVE surprised you?"

The tone was suave, yet delicately cool, and Caroline Delafield, standing motionless at the door of Evelyn's little upstairs library, which Penelope had flung wide for her, fixed her gaze upon the woman with whom her own strength was now to be matched. Her face was very white, but with a peculiar luminosity that gave an unnatural brilliance to her aspect; yet save for her extreme pallor the small, finely chiseled features gave no sign of emotion of any kind. Her self-command was perfect, even to the still and studied manner in which she stood, her hands lightly folded, her attitude that of one who with thorough assurance, if not with a shade of condescension, awaits an audience.

At first sight of the beautiful and graceful figure in the doorway, Evelyn had taken a step or two forward, with hand outstretched in welcome. Then suddenly and abruptly she paused, while her breath came quickly as if she were startled out of all composure.

A heavy darkness, pall-like, oppressive, seemed to be closing about her, blinding her, suffocating her, rendering her powerless to speak or move. In the midst of it her hand fell limply to her side, and as she struggled to recover herself a low, remembered, and exquisitely modulated voice broke upon her ears, like the sound of pearls falling upon a hard surface smoothly, softly—and she

knew that she had made no mistake. For the woman she saw before her and the one who with strange *abandon* she had seen fling herself into the arms of Geoffrey Baylor three years before in the mountains of North Carolina were one and the same.

But Caroline's careful voice suggested something more than just an attitude of particular culture toward her native speech: it implied a sort of audaciously assumed superiority from whose height she was inclined to look down in satirical contempt upon any evidence she might see in others of lack of her own tremendous nerve and force. And Evelyn, perceiving it, had felt herself suddenly roused as a mettlesome steed is roused by the first touch of the whip. Her expression altered.

She came forward slowly but with a quickly recovered dignity, and once more she graciously held out her hand.

"I was not expecting you until to-morrow," she said in a tone that was as controlled as Caroline's own, yet unstudied, and so profoundly sad that the small figure on the threshold approached a step or two and waited, curious, inquiring, and keenly alert, while Evelyn added:

"I am very glad that you were strong enough after your illness to come a day earlier than you intended. Perhaps you will be cleverer than the rest of us in evading Alfred's inquiries about his father. Dr. Beverley prefers that he shall not be told—anything distressing."

Caroline's lips closed firmly. Apparently that matter was one that could wait. But her expression showed a cool disdain of Dr. Beverley and of anything that he might require, as with a shrug of her slim shoulders she seated herself daintily in the large chair near the window to which Evelyn with a wave of the hand had directed her.

For a moment the two women sat speechless, while the

brain of each toiled with matters vast and serious, and in unconventional scrutiny each confronted the other with emotions as simple and as ancient as those which stirred Elaine and Guinevere when, as the old book quaintly says, "either made other good cheer by countenance but nothing with hearts."

It was a long moment, heavily weighted; and strange to say, Caroline's eyes were the first to falter, though she made no haste to break the spell of silence. Something in Evelyn's direct gaze had baffled and for the instant disconcerted her, but she was by no means conquered by it. "At last, then!" she was saying savagely over and over to herself—"at last!" After the three years of waiting suspense was finally ended, and at least she knew, as far as observation merely and her own gift of penetration could reveal it, what order of woman it was of whom she had thought so much and so long.

Yet, how much did she know? She had grown very pale as she gazed into the beautiful, melancholy face before her, and she was strangely puzzled by its sadness. Could it be grief for Alfred that had traced such sorrow upon it? She must know, if the whole machinery of her brain were taxed to discover it. Certainly Evelyn was different, far different from the radiant being her imagination had pictured, though one indeed lovely enough, she acknowledged with bitter pain, to drive men to the very extreme of madness.

Her breath came in short gasps that enraged her; and suddenly, as she sat thinking, by a swift rush of memory that same scene in North Carolina that a moment before had presented itself to Evelyn's eyes with such startling distinctness was once more made vivid for her, one of the actors. And again she heard Geoffrey's voice, telling her, in the shaken tones of the most romantic of

lovers, of the woman to whom he had given all the passionate devotion of his young manhood, while her own heart—crushed and despairing beneath the blow, recognizing that the dream which through all the years of her unholy married life had sustained her with a flickering hope had dissolved—had all at once grown wild and desperate. It had seemed, she knew, to his chivalric high breeding—as soon as he had recovered from his surprise at her mad action—only a result of over-taxed nerves that had led her to fling herself so recklessly into his arms. She recalled with a shiver of shame his pitying and unkindled kindness, and later his return, with a lover's persistence of delight in speaking of the one adored, to a fuller description of Evelyn. How his words had cut and stung her—just as the memory of them cut and stung her now, until her whole being grew hard as adamant in spite of the difference which the respective situations brought before her mind.

Had the two wholly forgotten? It was the thought which day and night perplexed her. Geoffrey had given no explanation of the end of the affair beyond the simple statement that he had made a mistake; and it was less her daring than her judgment which had forborne to question him.

But now, after weeks of rebellion against the strange concatenation of events which would soon culminate by bringing into inevitable association the central figures of a drama in which, all unknown to herself, she had already wrought a desperate crisis, and in which henceforward she proposed to play no minor part, she had all at once come to rejoice in the very circumstance which up to this moment had filled her with a humiliating dread. In the contingency upon her she foresaw a means of alleviation. Much that hitherto had been hidden would now be made

clear, and, with the instinct of the brave and the defiant, all her faculties at the approach of danger were immediately aroused. Eager to know the worst, she hugged opportunity to her.

Evelyn spoke first. Although her manner had grown formal, there was a wistful tenderness in her tone that seemed, however, directed to something remote from the person addressed, and that suddenly suffused her whole countenance with a peculiar beauty, as with a swift returning the present in all its tragic significance, and with it the divine emotion of compassion, took hold of her to the sudden exclusion of the personal.

"I think I should prepare you a little before—before you see him," she said gravely and tremulously, while her eyes filled with tears. "But you will not be shocked. There were no disfiguring cuts and bruises. It is not—not that. But, oh, the utter helplessness—!" She broke off abruptly, and waited a moment before she began again, steadying her voice. "The thing that is unnerving about it all is his perfect acquiescence—the marvelous sweetness and patience with which he has accepted—everything. He is like a little child in his spirit of simple dependence, and he is so—so touching in his gratitude for the simplest thing one does for him."

She had spoken, evidently, straight from the heart, and with a sort of desperate reaching out toward the one point of contact which could possibly be established between herself and the woman before her. But Caroline was able to read an inauspicious meaning into the words. She reflected a moment before she replied, her eyes wandering to the window, while her brain leaped to a quick conclusion.

"He was always like that," she responded, presently, a trifle dryly. "Even as a mischievous little boy he in-

variably outwitted punishment by his cheerful good-humor, so that every one recognized that it was needless to try to discipline him by such method. He seemed equally indifferent to the act committed and the penalty inflicted. The truth is, his is not a nature that is benefited by chastisement—if any nature ever is. I should like to know what the saintly people who seek to see the hand of Providence in all human conditions, even in such calamity as this, would have to say in his case.” All at once she turned fiercely, the sarcasm of her speech developing into a distant bitterness in which the ring of individual pain sounded austere defiance. “How could one help but hate the God who could deal out such unmercifulness!” she cried.

Evelyn was silent. For an instant she met the flash of the gray eyes bent upon her, and then, not hurriedly, but with a soft veiling that seemed both an instinctive protection of her inmost nature as well as a physical screening, the lids drooped over the brown eyes, and she sat gazing upon her slim hands, folded quietly in her lap yet quivering a little under the tension of the difficult interview.

The mystery of pain, of disaster, and the awful lessons they teach—how could she touch upon such things with this cold, strange woman, who would listen to what she might say only to question, possibly to scoff? And yet, out of the chaos and confusion of the past terrible weeks, she was aware that there had come to her such deep new revelation of spiritual things as to make her whole attitude of soul toward these human experiences altered and uplifted; so that in the midst of the dark waters in which she had been groping blindly she had reached at last a solid rock.

Whether this had come about through a sense of shock

by means of which in her wild outreaching for some sort of foothold in the horrible darkness she had stumbled upon the very shore that was ultimately to rescue her, or through some faint ray from that distant splendid Vision to which she had willfully closed her eyes, but which, being a part of the Heavenly Vision, lingered still to make the gloomy pathway plain, she scarcely knew. For as yet in her changed relation to life much was still in doubt, still to be made sure. But in all her grappling with the finer things of the spirit two things had stood out with a profound personal meaning; and she saw in the calamity which had befallen her young husband both a means of atonement for herself and of escape for him. Henceforth, in the passion of service which possessed her, existence was to be a supreme sacrifice. And in shielding him from every suspicion of the blighting knowledge which would have been his had he returned unharmed to his desolate home, she would be able, she knew, to find some small consolation even when overcome by the surging of the deep grief which constantly beset her at thought of the wrong she had done him.

She sat twisting the rings upon her slender hands an instant longer absorbed in a meditation that seemed to render her unconscious of the other's presence, or at least unmindful of the close scrutiny to which she was being subjected. Then she abruptly raised her eyes, and for the first time one of the slow, beautiful smiles which Geoffrey had described to Caroline with such poetic fervor, and which gave to her beauty its peculiar quality of radiance and of a far-away, mysterious sadness tinged with strangeness, broke softly over Evelyn's features.

"Perhaps when you have seen him," she murmured, low

under her breath, "you will understand why one does not any longer hate God."

Caroline's expression grew coldly mutinous. She darted a quick glance from beneath her half-closed lids, and sent her shaft flying.

"I have just seen him; and it scarcely had the effect upon me which you describe. Submission is a state of mind possible only to the weak, the conquered—the robust and the victorious know nothing of it."

Evelyn turned a hurt and startled countenance. She was breathing quickly, her impulsive nature roused to an acute sense of passionate protection.

"You have seen him!" she exclaimed, incredulous, unheeding of the latter portion of the remark. All at once she glanced at Caroline's mourning garments and sat upright. "He is under the impression that his father is still living, and that you have been detained in Woodford County because of his continued illness. Dr. Beverley—"

"Dr. Beverley is a fussy old woman, and that trained nurse you have is simply bordering upon idiocy. I encountered her on the landing just after I ascended the stairs. However, I had my way—I usually do." The small teeth gleamed for a moment malevolently, and then the expression grew tense. "Of course I went immediately to my brother as soon as I arrived, and—naturally—I told him that our father is dead."

Evelyn half rose. "Oh, you have told him?"

Her voice quivered with reproach and pain, and once more her eyes filled with tears.

Caroline watched the display of feeling with calm disdain, her delicate but strong features becoming obdurate in their fixity of expression. "It is pity—nothing but pity," she kept saying over and over to herself, with an intensity of emotion that made her cheeks grow pale,

while deep down into her inmost consciousness there sank with piercing significance the conviction which already her shrewd suspicion had prepared her to receive. Suddenly, anticipating Evelyn's intention, she put forth a cool, detaining hand.

"Don't go to him, please—at least not for a little while."

The tone was imperious, yet thoroughly suave, and Evelyn waited, uncertain and wondering.

"But if he should want me?" she objected, hastily, altogether too troubled to be inclined to resent anything on her own account, and scarcely conscious of the audacity expressed in the interference. Guided only by a blind instinct that for an instant eliminated self, she was eager to flee at once to Alfred and, if possible, by her presence to soften the ruthless blow which had just been dealt him. The picture of the poor boy, already so stricken, so pathetically impotent, lying alone and desolate with his grief, came before her eyes to the exclusion of everything beside, and again gave to her aspect that look of maternal solicitude which it had worn, and which Caroline had instantly perceived, at the first mention of his name.

Yet something made her hesitate now to go to him. The power of insinuation, of artfully conveying a thought without remotely touching upon it, was Caroline's in a marked degree; and in the next moment, Evelyn found herself shrinking almost guiltily under an assumption that refused to pay tribute to any wifely feeling in herself.

Presently she leaned a little forward. She was breathing quickly, and in a painful, sob-like fashion. Her hands were tightly clenched. Despite the inward revolt which her pride made, she realized that she was being driven irresistibly on to something in the nature of explanation,

of apology even, when Caroline's still face checked her.

She scarcely knew what she had meant to say, yet in the absolute consecration of herself to the duty she saw before her, in her long nightly vigils in Alfred's dimly lighted room, her almost uninterrupted watchfulness at his bedside, her unflagging endurance, which had recently outlived the strength of two nurses in the same number of weeks, perhaps she saw hope of mitigation in Caroline's evident attitude of severity toward her—a severity that in her nervous, excited state seemed the result of a natural sisterly resentment of some lack in herself which Caroline had immediately discovered.

But the spontaneity which, notwithstanding an extreme delicacy and reserve in relation to all the deeper and finer things of life, gave to her nature its quality of winsomeness and charm, and which in her association with most persons of her acquaintance was apt to be apparent, had received a sudden curb. When she spoke again it was with a greater formality than she had yet used.

"I seldom leave him for so long a time, and now—now I am quite sure he needs me."

"I am quite sure that he does not," responded Caroline, imperturbably. "On the contrary, he particularly requested that he be unmolested for a little while—otherwise, I should have remained with him. One must have lost one's father to know just what that sort of deprivation means. And if you will pardon me for such frankness, I should say that it would be scarcely possible that you should understand and enter into his feelings at this time."

Evelyn sank back into her chair, aghast and trembling under the rudeness of the smoothly uttered words, while Caroline, with the evident intention of completing what she had begun, and with a smile that played over her

cold, beautiful features like sunlight on a bit of exquisitely polished marble, added, blandly:

"I don't doubt that you have been everything that is dutiful and kind, but it is just possible that there may be times when even so loving a wife as yourself may be somewhat superfluous."

In the hint of a subtle irony underlying the speech there was the suggestion of things too intimate and private for even Caroline's daring further to venture upon. She changed the subject abruptly, at the same time stifling a yawn. But there was a distinct method in the question she asked a moment afterward.

"If you think it would not bore you to stay a little longer with me, would you mind telling me something of the persons—numerically considered—who have been to make inquiry, and, as old Colonel Douglas would say, 'to pay their respects'? Of course you kept the cards?"

There was a faintly perceptible anxiety as well as a slight irritation in the demand. But Evelyn only answered carelessly.

"The cards?" she repeated, letting her gaze wander to the open window and on out to the distant woodland where a flock of sheep peacefully slept on a shady slope. "I believe I gave directions concerning them. Just recently they have first been brought to Alfred's room. It has pleased him to know that so many persons were thinking kindly of him."

"Oh, I daresay," responded Caroline, absently. She made a movement as if to rise and then ignored it. "Will you ring? The bell is just above your hand there. Ah, thanks. I should like to know who are our best friends. One cannot always tell—without the test."

When the cards were finally brought she bent over the package which supplemented those upon the little silver

tray with a strange eagerness, while she proceeded to assort the whole mechanically into piles made up of cards belonging to the same persons or to those of the same family. The action was so deliberate, so evidently without ulterior instigation that Evelyn was unsuspecting of design when presently she was asked quite casually if she had seen any of the very old friends of the household who had called.

"Only one person," she made answer, "a lovely white-haired old lady who sent word that she was a near relative of Alfred's and an old friend of my father's and that she refused positively to leave until she had pressed my hand."

Caroline looked up. "Was she soft and white, with a cheerful, comfortable sort of philosophy, and a reminiscent coquetry? Then, that was surely our old cousin Mrs. Mary Madison, and it was well for you that Colonel Marshall Douglas—our neighbor across the way—was not also possessed of a desire to press your hand at the same time and moment, else you might have had a somewhat exciting scene to witness. He chanced to meet her here once," she continued, busy once more with the cards, "and he had no hesitation in denouncing her before a roomful of people. It is the one time he has been known to speak to her in more than fifty years. It seems"—and Caroline raised her eyes and looked with acute directness into Evelyn's face—"it seems she was engaged to him in their youth, but for some reason broke with him—with the result that the colonel first attempted to blow his brains out, then decided to give some one else opportunity to perform that pleasant office for him and joined the army. He came home, however, without a scratch, but inwardly it appears he was far from healed. He developed into a confirmed old bachelor and cynic, and he

continues a woman-hater unto this day. Our modern young men take such mishaps more lightly. They are apt to believe that if one woman fails them, another, and perhaps a far more desirable one, is still to be had."

Evelyn made no comment, but a flame of crimson mounted slowly from neck to brow, and there came into her eyes the quick, startled look which a deer shows in the instant he perceives that the hunter is on his track.

Caroline leaned far back in her chair, and a curious gleam leaped from beneath her lowered lids.

"I have thirteen cards here from the old colonel, who, by the way, loves Alfred as fondly as he despises me. There are just two, no, three, from his nephew, so it seems that Geoffrey, when more convenient to himself, prefers to send his proxy. I believe Mr. Baylor is an acquaintance of yours? Did you happen by any accident to see him when he came?"

Again that burning crimson swept her, and Evelyn felt her heart beating with a tumult she was powerless to quell. Caroline's tiny hands, so white, so fierce, grasped firmly the arms of her chair, and it was evident despite her utter stillness that she too was undergoing a secret tension. Presently the color slowly receded from Evelyn's face, leaving her of a deathlike pallor. But composure had completely returned to her, and with it a certain remoteness of bearing that made the manner of the other woman beneath all its surface polish appear strangely crude.

"I have, of course, seen no one," she said, "beside the person I mentioned. But I have promised Alfred that hereafter I will see all the older people who come, not forgetting"—she smiled faintly and distantly—"not forgetting Colonel Marshall Douglas."

"That would surely be very good of you," responded

Caroline, becoming all at once slightly restive as Evelyn's poise returned to her. "Naturally, nothing in such line is to be expected of me at present. Besides, I shall be very busy. Mr. Baylor and I are deeply absorbed in his new drama which is soon to appear, and toward which I hold the office of critic. I have been aiding him by suggestion—and in other ways. We were sadly interrupted when I was called away at the time of my father's illness; and he had to go over the proofs alone. He has also other work mapped out, the greatest of which being his *Tristram and Iseult*, which is to be the large achievement of his life. It surely is a splendid theme, and with his ability and—and his experience, he should be able to do big things with it."

She beat a little tattoo on the arm of her chair, and then quite absently, as if addressing herself to no one, went over softly Arnold's lines:

"There were two Iseults who did sway
Each her hour of *Tristram's* day."

As her voice died away there was a knock at the door, and the nurse appeared. Evelyn rose and crossed the room quickly. A hurried colloquy took place on the threshold; then Evelyn turned and faced the small figure in the Morris chair. "Pardon me if I leave you abruptly," she explained, "but Alfred needs me."

As the door closed Caroline sprang to her feet. She stood a moment, her face paling.

"For Alfred it is pity—just pity," she said to herself, while her hands clasped and unclasped, "but for Geoffrey"—a strained look came into her eyes for an instant and then hardened into something fixed and unrelenting—"for Geoffrey," she repeated, slowly, "it is love—*it still is love!*"

CHAPTER II

COLONEL DOUGLAS HAS HIS SUSPICIONS CONFIRMED

UP the long avenue leading to the Merriweather abode old Colonel Marshall Douglas came walking slowly, the mellow September sunlight falling softly upon his sleek attire and gleaming upon the strands of silver in his still abundant black hair and short, heavy beard.

The lean tall figure in the frock coat and top hat moved with a picturesque and stately dignity. His dark and whimsically captious countenance was bent upon the ground, indifferent alike to the sapphire sky which yearned above the beautiful earth, and to the glistening green of the velvet turf, showing already its marvelous aftermath with the approach of the early autumn days. His hands were clasped behind his back, his lips were firmly set, and his brow was puckered with additional lines deeper even than those made there by the ordinary fretfulness which so easily beset him, or by the habitual thought of the scholar-recluse.

Plainly some secret annoyance of sufficient gravity to engross him wholly had shown itself in a life far from peaceful. And as he walked there was a brooding bitterness in the downcast eyes as of one who, still chafing under an old wound, sternly resents the new. But with the austerity of expression and of bearing there was the curious opposition of a conflicting trait—a sort of fleeting and defeated tenderness that, though routed, lingered

still, and played upon his scarred countenance like a pitying sun lighting up a hard fought battle field.

To the closely observant—added to traces of a once proud beauty that showed beneath the gnarled visage of the old man whose youth had early died with the death of his one great passion—there were hints of emotion delicate and profound that had been cruelly crucified; while to most he was merely a somewhat difficult and uncomfortable sort of person whom one ordinarily would prefer not to encounter, irascible, impatient, a student of mankind, yet a misanthrope, and above all a being with a tongue capable at times of cutting sharper than a sword. The one interest which had ever broken in upon the monotony of loneliness and bitterness that had lasted with him through a period of more than fifty years had been Geoffrey; and now Geoffrey, it appeared, was about to fail him—for love of a woman.

And for such a woman! To the unrelenting scorn which he had come to feel for most womankind, particularly the beautiful and the charming, there was reserved a special contempt for Caroline inspired by the inherent power in her, which he did not fail to perceive, but which seemed to him in her relation to Geoffrey likely to be the very source and instrument of his destruction. How was it possible, he continually demanded of himself in his long and ireful ruminations on the subject, ever to attain the high mark in his calling which had once been prophesied for him if he were to come under the domination of such a woman as she?—"a scheming, self-seeking jade," as he was wont to describe her in his thoughts, who would use his gifts as a mere stepping-stone to her own unholy aims, and who doubtless even now had so enmeshed him in her toils that escape was an impossibility.

But he was as yet still painfully in the dark as to Geof-

frey's actual relation to the woman he despised. Dread alone was the cause of his disturbance. That his nephew spent hours out of every day with the beautiful widow across the way was a suspicion, however, against which his wrath would have surely thundered, had not instinct, still undulled with him, in spite of years of acrimony, warned him against the unadvisability of such a course. Only once had the old man ever ventured to make mention of Mrs. Delafield's name, and the result of that attempt had been far from satisfactory. Geoffrey's proud spirit, chafing already under a temporary dependence, would ill brook, he knew, any high-handed interference in his own most private and sacred rights. And it was with an inward mutiny not only against Caroline as chief offender, but against Geoffrey also, and the dignity which could compel him to silence, that the colonel finally determined to make investigation for himself.

As he approached the house Colonel Douglas's action became eccentric. Suddenly roused in the midst of his abstraction, and becoming aware of his environment, he paused abruptly, adjusted his glasses, and darted a hasty and furtive glance to the right of him, his keen eyes searching anxiously the rustic chairs and benches half hidden in the twilight shadows made by overhanging vines and branches. Then he wheeled and repeated the performance on the left. Satisfied that the little summer-house covered with clematis and the honey-suckle nook beyond it were also innocent of occupants, he moved rapidly forward. Turning sharply the corner of the great white building, he made his way toward the rear, his steps becoming with every instant more nervous and impatient, his gaze more cunningly alert.

Undeterred by the scruples which ordinarily would have restrained him against such intrusion, he continued

his search, next proceeding in the direction of the garden, and prowling around his neighbor's premises with a singleness of purpose that took small account of the proprieties. On one side of the garden a little footpath led past the vine-covered palings through the orchard to a beautiful wood beyond; and thinking it possible that he might find the offenders there, he decided to make his way thither, meaning to cover over any embarrassment that might be attendant upon his unexpected appearance, if excuses were necessary, by a speedy subterfuge—the orchard path being a short cut to the home of a friend.

He was just passing the gardener's cottage with this sinister plan in mind when he heard a feeble cough at his elbow.

The colonel turned with his odd abruptness, and surveyed the small figure in the doorway with a curious blending of his customary scorn of womankind and the special, if somewhat lordly, kindness which he was apt to bestow upon an inferior.

"How do you do, madam?" he inquired, gravely, peering curiously through his spectacles.

The woman dropped her eyes, but made no answer.

"How do you do, madam?" repeated the colonel, impatiently, perceiving the faint sniveling sound the small creature was making and becoming annoyed by her silence. "I asked, How do you do?"

It was an unhappy question, since the colonel was in haste and the woman's woes were many. Suddenly taking heart, she opened her mouth and proceeded to pour forth such a tale of multiplied misfortune as Colonel Douglas little suspected he would call down upon himself when making his innocent inquiry. Her husband, it appeared, was laid up with an attack of "grip," Jacky had

had the croup, and Sammy had the measles, Jennie had stumped her toe, while Annie and Joe—

She was about to continue the account of her minor grievances and then, it was evident, enter, as a melancholy climax, upon some supreme catastrophe that had overtaken her house, when the colonel, who all along had been listening with ill-concealed restlessness, his eyes wandering hither and thither about the lawn, suddenly espied something that caused him to cut in hotly:

"Oh, damn it, woman!" he exclaimed. "I don't care anything about the details; I just asked you for politeness." And without more ado he dug his cane fiercely into the ground, turned on his heel, and walked away.

He moved only a few steps, however, and that in a lateral direction, before he paused. Then, all at once, pushing aside the syringa bushes and stooping slightly he saw the objects of his search.

They were not very far away, and they were in full view of the library windows, Caroline's soft white fluffy garments, instead of the black gown he had expected to see, having for an instant deceived him as to the wearer.

They were sitting side by side beneath a wide spreading maple, and a small round table on which were strewn books and pens and paper was drawn up before them. Their two heads were very near together and bent earnestly above a page of manuscript upon which they were laboring with deep absorption and with absolute disregard of everything save themselves and the matter with which they were concerned.

Now and then Caroline's clear, decisive voice, settling a point of special moment, would break in upon Geoffrey's concentrated study of the text, her suggestion evidently meeting with a respect that implied his confidence in

her powers, and that also filled the old colonel with rebellion and rage.

For some time he stood surveying the two from behind the clump of syringas, his dark countenance quivering with that sense of impotence which age feels in the presence of beauty powerfully exerted to its own ends and strong to defy all opposition. At first glance the immediate bond between the two might have seemed to be merely that of a cheerful helpfulness on the part of Caroline, and on Geoffrey's a man's grateful dependence upon a cultured woman's fine and delicate perception, art and not love cementing the hold which united them so closely. But the colonel was not deceived. His shrewd observation did not stop here. And below the surface of Caroline Delafield's deeply engrossed friendliness he saw what to his wily mind completely gave the lie to her apparent simplicity: a deliberateness of design that roused him to a speedy resolution.

As his eyes first rested upon the slim, elegant figure in the alluring white gown, every detail of which he recognized and stigmatized in no uncertain language as "a devil's snare set to entrap the unwary," doubt gave way to surety and his heart sank within him. But it was only for an instant. The next moment the old spirit of conflict which with him was only too prone to assert itself awoke with redoubled force, and with it the pride of personal power and of passionate resistance. Once more the colonel's fighting blood was up, and conscious of a certain exhilaration as he realized that with such a woman one must proceed promptly or not at all, he was more than ready for action. An idea had struck him.

Chuckling slyly to himself, suddenly he turned and walked briskly across the lawn, carefully avoiding, however, the neighborhood of the two under the maple, yet

keeping a watchful eye upon them, until he had reached the corner of the house. Then he pressed forward, his features assuming their normal expression of cynical unconcern. And finally he presented himself at the front door with a well-formulated plan in mind, and with his most erect and military air much in evidence.

When a servant appeared in response to his ring, he drew forth his card, a somewhat crafty smile leaping across his countenance as he bent his head for an instant. But when he spoke it was with an immediate return to stateliness and with a curiously impassive mien as he eyed the tall negro in the doorway.

"Take this to your young mistress," he commanded, "and say that Colonel Marshall Douglas waits below and particularly desires an audience."

"I is mighty sorry, sir, but I'm 'bleeged to 'scuse Miss Ca'line dis mornin', sir; she powerful busy."

The colonel's manner grew irritable.

"Is Mrs. Delafield your mistress, you young block-head?" he roared. "I am inquiring for Mrs. Merriweather. Go to her at once and say that Colonel Douglas, desiring to pay his respects, awaits her pleasure." And with that he stalked majestically into the house and made his way without so much as a further glance at the astonished domestic straight toward the library, his cane clicking loudly on the hardwood floor as he strode through the hall.

Evelyn was sitting reading aloud to Alfred, whose invalid chair had been wheeled out upon an upstairs veranda, when the message and card were duly delivered to her. Without speaking, she leaned a little forward and placed the card on the arm of Alfred's chair, at the same time dismissing the servant with a nod. Her eyes were downcast, and a shadow seemed to have fallen upon her.

Alfred studied her a moment curiously. Then he smiled.

"He has come so many times, dear, to ask about me, and you know he is old. Do you think you would mind very much going down to him for a little while? He is rather a rum sort."

Alfred looked appealingly toward her, his face a trifle pale and drawn, yet full of the old cheerful humor, and playful now with boyish glee in anticipation of the impression the quaint figure of the colonel would make upon Evelyn on seeing him for the first time.

She closed the book softly, and laid it with somewhat prolonged carefulness on the table at her side. She did not look up, and her expression was thoughtful and deeply serious.

"I will see him," she said, and rose. There was no haste, yet something more than patient acquiescence in her readiness to do his bidding—a sort of voluntary surrender of her own inclination that seemed to carry with it a distinct momentary uplift. Her averted eyes shone with the quiet light of a self-forgetful purpose.

"I want him—every one," she added, standing a moment in the doorway, the arch framing her in her white serge gown, "to know that we are grateful. I hope they will—all—come again, and often, to see you. It will make your loneliness seem so much more bearable."

He looked at her steadily for a moment and his love leaped into his eyes.

"My loneliness!" he exclaimed. "Darling, you have never let me be lonely for a minute. Even when you have to go away and leave me for a little while, I am not alone, for I have always my thoughts of you, and your love is with me all the time. Without it I never could have borne this, but with it—well, you know what it

means to me, and I mustn't keep you standing there."

Still she waited. "Have you any message?" she asked.

"Oh, thank him, you know, and all that; the colonel is not usually given to taking much bother about his fellow-creatures, so you musn't forget that we have been specially honored. By the way, tell him that I'm eager for the sight of Geof. What's become of the fellow, anyhow? I suppose though, he'll be around here often enough now that Caroline has come home."

She came back a moment and tucked the light coverlet a little more closely about him, her head turned away the while. He caught her hand in his and pressed his lips upon it. "Dear!" he whispered, softly, out of his deep content, "dear!"

Though there was a peculiar gentleness in her manner, she had seemed to grow absent. But as she moved away, his eyes, still following her lovingly, discerned no lack.

She found the colonel sitting bolt upright in a massive leathern chair, his hand firmly grasping his ivory-headed cane, his eyes staring straight and with uncompromising demand at the opposite wall, and his whole expression indicative of a gravity that was commensurate with the dignity of his errand.

Evelyn came forward with a customary cordiality of greeting. But at sight of the odd personage who rose to meet her, her manner slightly changed, and a certain winsome frankness, that with younger persons sometimes seemed to lose itself in a reserve that was yet gracious and a mystery that allured, showed itself in speech and accent.

"It has been very kind of you, Colonel Douglas," she said, "to come so many times to inquire. Mr. Merriweather wishes me to tell you of his grateful apprecia-

tion. Your constant thought of him and your silent sympathy have told him, perhaps, better than any words could have done that you too have been sorry."

The colonel fixed his keen old eyes upon her, and studied her calmly. He did not speak for a moment, and when he did his reply nearly swept her off her feet.

"Madam," he responded, without moving a muscle of his face, and quoting gravely from de la Rochefoucauld, "'we have all sufficient strength to endure the misfortunes of others.'"

Evelyn's expression of blank surprise followed by a swift transition—a look of humorous and wholly unresentful acceptance of the remark—did not escape him. As she motioned him to a chair and sat down with her back to the open window, the colonel rose and crossed the room to her side. He was still eyeing her narrowly.

"Will you allow me," he asked, "to offer you another chair? Draughts, permit me to remind you, are dangerous."

He wheeled a chair in full view of the spreading sugar-maple tree, his eyes, however, steadfastly ignoring the two beneath it with a deliberate purpose in mind.

But Evelyn, smiling and unconscious, refused the admonition.

"Do you mean to imply, Colonel Douglas, that in case I should be the victim of a draught you will have sufficient strength to endure it also as well as all other misfortunes that may befall your fellow mortals?"

The colonel once more looked long and steadily into the beautiful, sad face, lit now by a rare and fleeting gleam of mirth that transformed it strangely. It was some time before he deigned a reply. Even yet, in spite of all his careful probing, he was by no means sure of the quality of woman with whom he had to deal. His own

thorough enlightenment had enabled him quickly to recognize her high-breeding, but it had left him still in doubt as to certain important traits of character by means of which alone he could hope to find an avenue of approach. He recalled his Schopenhauer with an agreeable sense of mental support: "Between men there is by nature merely indifference, but between women there is enmity even by nature," while to himself he added with an inward chuckle: "Doubtless, by this time they are more than ready to tear each other's eyes out."

But Evelyn had involved him in greater confusion than his preconceived opinion of women as a whole often allowed him to be. Evidently here was a being not to be summarily disposed of on the usual lines. Against his will he found himself being won by her. Gradually the result of his scrutiny of the lovely face became neutralized by uncertainty. His brows knit.

Presently he broke forth with an amusing mixture of seriousness and mockery: "Madam," he exclaimed, with a droll smile, "I don't wonder that the poor boy loved you—Alfred always was a foolish, soft sort of fellow."

"And you think he gave excellent evidence of his folly by his choice of me? Can't you forgive him for falling in love?"

Evelyn was laughing as she had not done for many a day, and the old colonel, hearing in the sound of her voice echoes of things that smote him sharply, suddenly cut in with a frown:

"Madam, I agree with Lord Bacon: 'Love is a nuisance and an impediment to important action.' Schopenhauer's views, you will recall, are also equally sound with respect to the domination of woman. 'Individual and partial exceptions,' he says, 'do not alter the fact that women are and remain, taken as a whole, the

most inveterate and incurable Philistines. Hence it is, that owing to the absurd arrangement that they share the position and title of the man, they are the continual spurs of his ignoble ambition; and what is more, owing to the same quality, their domination and influence is the ruination of modern society.' ”

His eyes, wandering away for an instant to the two beneath the maple, flashed with an indignation that was by no means merely abstract. But before Evelyn could offer any defense, he bowed gravely.

“But pardon me,” he said, “I digress. Allow me to reveal at once the object of my call. Other visits to this house, recently, permit me to say, have been for the purpose of offering condolence to your unfortunate young husband, of whom, I may add, I entertain sentiments of lively esteem. My visit to-day, however, is of a different nature. I have come to confer with you upon a very delicate matter—a matter that concerns my young nephew, Geoffrey Baylor, and your sister-in-law, Mrs. Caroline Delafield.”

Evelyn paled. Her eyes, which a moment before had been fixed upon his whimsical countenance with an expression of playful good humor and inquisitive interest, suddenly faltered, and the lids closed over them quickly, as if the penetrating gaze riveted upon them had all at once become an actual instrument of physical pain. An acute shiver shook her from head to foot. It passed, and she regained her self-command.

“May I ask,” she said, a trifle distantly, “what you could possibly have to say to me upon such a subject? Please recall that Mrs. Delafield is practically a stranger to me.”

Colonel Douglas cut in sharply. “And is likely to continue a stranger to you, unless you are able to match

your wits against those of as clever a woman as I happen to know—as clever and as resourceful.”

The old gentleman was distinctly nettled, and his tone was low and ominous. Evelyn looked up quickly. A sudden flush had dyed her face from neck to brow. She was quivering from the shock of a rudely awakened self-consciousness, and her application of his words was purely personal.

“There is no reason that I know of why I should attempt to match my wits against any one,” she responded, with a slight tremor in her voice that yet did not belie the proud distance from which the words were spoken. Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap, as if she were bracing herself against the approach of an unendurable danger. “How much,” she was asking herself with horror, “had this terrible old man guessed with respect to herself and Geoffrey?” But an instant afterward she saw the absurdity of her fears, inspired, as they were, by a poignant and overwrought introspection.

“Madam, there is one reason,” he was saying with a courtly courtesy that seemed designed to accentuate rather than diminish the force of his cynicism, “madam, there is one reason, and it holds with a woman always whenever another woman is concerned. It is based upon a fundamental instinct: the instinct of self-preservation. If circumstances are to bring you into collision with Mrs. Delafield, and if the fight for supremacy here between you two should assume, as it possibly will, definite lines, you will understand my reference. In that case”—and the colonel chuckled gleefully in anticipation of the fulfillment of his prophecy—“in that case,” he repeated, “I am sure you will perceive the meaning of my reference. It will doubtless not be a part of her calculations to allow you to understand her too thoroughly. Schopenhauer says

of women that they 'are driven by nature to have recourse not to force but to cunning; hence their instinctive treachery, and their irremediable lying.' "

He waited an instant, bowed low with grim, sardonic humor, and began again.

"However," he explained, "it is not with respect to your own private relation to Mrs. Delafield that I am moved to express myself. I have come, my dear lady, upon a most serious errand. My nephew's welfare is at stake. And as distasteful as such discussion may be to you, I must nevertheless demand that you hear me. Were my young friend Alfred in a condition to listen to what I have to say in this matter, naturally I should be compelled to turn to him. But you will permit me to say that even in that case I should prefer you. Where man is clumsy, woman is apt to be skillful; and the present crisis is one that requires to be managed delicately—most delicately."

Evelyn half-rose, and then, impelled by an impulse that made her feel for the moment untrue to the dignity which the situation required, she sank back into her chair.

"What is it that you wish to say to me—that you wish me to do?" she asked, huskily, below her breath.

The colonel's reply was brief and directly to the point.

"I wish you to make clear to Mrs. Delafield that my estate, which I have recently willed to my nephew, Geoffrey Baylor, will be bestowed only upon a definitely fixed condition."

"And that condition—?" She despised herself for the inquiry, yet it broke from her.

"That condition is that he shall not marry Mrs. Caroline Delafield."

There was a moment of intense silence throughout the room, and then Colonel Douglas spoke again.

"I shall not myself make this fact known to her unless driven to it as a last resort. Precipitation on my part in this matter would be unadvisable—with respect to my nephew, I mean. For her own sake, Mrs. Caroline Delafield should know at once her true status with me."

For a moment Evelyn sat thinking, swept on by a hurrying rush of emotions in which loyalty to the woman who was Alfred's sister and her own eagerness to know the truth made a painful conflict. Then she rose.

"I must say to you, Colonel Douglas, that it is quite out of the question that I should play the part in this affair to which you have assigned me. If Mrs. Delafield is to be informed of your attitude toward her it must be by some other person than myself."

She hesitated an instant, and her voice slightly wavered. "Possibly—just possibly, you are making a mistake," she added, in a tone so low that the colonel barely heard her, "and there may be nothing—nothing at all serious between the two. Are you sure that this is not merely suspicion?"

Her breath was coming with a rapidity as she put the question that was well-nigh suffocating. She took a step or two nearer to him, and then paused, her eager, desperate eyes searching his face.

But the colonel was too annoyed by her refusal to note the strangeness of her manner. For a moment he stared blankly, his countenance lowering. Then he too sprang to his feet, and with the alacrity of a boy.

"Suspicion!" he scoffed, between his clenched teeth, "suspicion!" All at once he grasped her firmly by the wrist. "Madam, let me ask you to take a look out of that window."

Still holding her firmly, he wheeled, and drawing her

along with him, he moved toward the window and drew back the damask curtain.

The scene beneath the maple was only slightly altered since the colonel had last looked out upon it. Geoffrey, however, was now about to take his departure, and the two had risen, Caroline's soft white against the background of green giving to her gracefully poised form something pleasingly in harmony with one's airy conception of a wood nymph. The two were speaking with great animation, and their faces were intense, interested, glowing. In addition to the conviction of thorough *camaraderie* that was instantly forced upon her at sight of them, there was the suggestion, she thought, of things deeper and more intimate; so that it was not difficult to believe that borne upward on the wings of poetry they had but recently reached a height on which not only passion was born but the security of larger feeling.

As her eyes rested upon them the color flamed into Evelyn's cheeks—for a moment a swift, painful crimson dyeing her like a stain—then it slowly receded, leaving her of a deathly pallor. She stood silent, motionless, staring fixedly. The room seemed to whirl and swim about her, and all at once the scene an instant before so vivid became blurred and confused.

It seemed that hours instead of seconds passed, when finally she was startled by a sound at her elbow. The colonel dropped the window curtain and turned upon her. His face was white.

"That is not suspicion, madam," he said, gravely and grimly; "that is fact!"

CHAPTER III

MARIA DOUGLAS

It was two weeks later, and near the close of one of those brilliant October days which come with such splendor to Kentucky, and which almost tempt one to believe that the beautiful woodlands, now all a-fire with autumn, are illumined by some marvelous, supernatural light descending upon regions of unreality.

Standing in her hat and short green walking-suit at the window of the little up-stairs library, and looking out upon the dim outline of towering trees in the distance, Evelyn felt the charm and the lure of beckoning branches, yet lingered still with that curious hesitation which a creature long caged feels on being at last granted its freedom. For days the forest beyond the orchard had been calling with imperious summons to her sorely troubled and rebellious spirit. But she had resisted, fighting down the impulse which urged her to any indulgence of the mood which swayed her with a certain proud defiance, and giving herself up wholly and with redoubled effort to Alfred's entertainment, her passion of sacrifice taking the form of such uninterrupted attendance upon him that there was left small time for thought.

But she was looking pale and tired, and Alfred had noticed; and when to-day, at a little before four, an old college friend of his had arrived, requesting that he be allowed to remain through the afternoon and part of the evening, Alfred had cheerfully acquiesced.

"He can have dinner up here with me, Evelyn," he cried, lending himself to the idea with pathetic childish delight, "and afterwards, maybe we can induce Caroline to come in for a game of bridge. I can't say that she takes much stock in Ascot, but the fellow's dead struck on her. He's a young countryman from down in the southern part of the state, and he is a politician with a future, you may bet your hat. Caroline thinks him powerful, but crude. He's of the soil, of course, and all that—woefully ignorant of many things in our small code, but possessed of a towering ambition. The voters of his district think a whole lot of him, and they have just elected him as their representative in Congress. I shouldn't wonder," Alfred suddenly paused and then grew confidential, "I shouldn't wonder, if that sister of mine hadn't bigger game in sight, if she wouldn't now think it worth her while to give a little more thought to Ascot. He's a fine fellow and a gentleman, and it hardly seems fair to find fault with his provincialism, in view of his lack of opportunity."

Evelyn had listened at first vaguely, and then with a more lively attention. But Alfred rattled on:

"As for you, you poor darling, you needn't bother about him in the least. I'll take care of him—if Caroline won't. You need a rest, and old Hugh couldn't have stumbled along at a more welcome moment. You look 'plum' wore out,' as Penelope would say, and nothing will set you up so speedily as a long, brisk walk in this jolly good air." He drew a deep, envious breath: "It's better than champagne," he added, quickly turning his face away that she might not see the spasm of pain which crossed it with the thought of his own disability.

She had finally yielded to his insistence, and left him to the society of the big six-footed politician, who a few moments before had come lumbering into the room like a

shy, overgrown school-boy, blushing furiously all over his broad, sunburnt countenance at sight of Evelyn, and towering above poor Alfred's maimed and helpless body like a huge statue in bronze.

She had dressed rapidly, preparatory to a long afternoon in the woods. Like Pippa on her one holiday, and yet under a stress that rendered her sadly unlike the little happy-hearted, silk-weaving girl, she was disposed to guard every moment of her precious time. For it was to be an interval of deliberate abdication, of passionate abandonment of herself to those primal forces within her against which her spirit had beat its wings in vain, until it lay at last like a wounded and bleeding bird. For two long hours, alone in the silent woods, which might soothe and pity, but never would betray, she was to surrender herself wholly to her despair and to the blinding, jealous pain which possessed her. And it was with that peculiar recklessness toward everything relating to the ethical aspect of a situation which sometimes, through a mere violence of reaction, takes hold of the temperament instinctively moral, that she gave herself up to the opportunity which unexpectedly had come to her.

Presently, becoming suddenly aware that she had wasted fully three minutes of her time, she turned and walked quickly from the room, and soon was moving with long, fleet steps down the orchard path toward the shadowy woods. Back of her was a glowing sun sinking slowly toward the west, yet magnificent in his dying splendor; and in her eyes there was a strange, hurt look that, when alone, never left them, and that had struggled to the surface in that awful moment in which the old colonel had made her a witness to the parting scene between Geoffrey and Mrs. Delafield.

Not once during all the days and nights which had

passed since then had that scene seemed ever really to fade from her vision. Even in sleep, when not actually seeing it repeated before her with the persistent recurrence of a painful dream, she was conscious of a slow, corroding anguish that seemed threatening to undermine the very foundations of that firm and solid structure she had sought to rear by means of sacrifice and of pure, selfless emotion. And to-day, she felt again at her heart the icy hand which had gripped it in that instant when Colonel Douglas drew back the window curtain and bade her look, and the feeling which possessed her bordered on the desperate.

On reaching the outskirts of the woods she quickened her pace, and did not pause until she had reached what she believed to be the very heart of its deepest density. Everywhere around there was a stillness so profound that the rustling of dried leaves beneath her feet sounded loud and ominous, startling the squirrels to a hurried disappearance, and rousing each alert and watchful thing of the forest as at the approach of the fowler.

She had paused beside a gnarled old tree around which a wild grape vine grew luxuriantly when, not very far away, she was startled to hear the steady reverberations of a horse's hoofs striking a hard road surface, and coming nearer and nearer.

Before she had time fully to realize whence the noise proceeded there was a break in its regularity, the click as of a gate swinging to, and then a more delicate repetition of the former sound, as a horse came galloping lightly over the soft, green turf.

A moment afterward the rider, a quite young woman in a tan colored habit, with which hair and complexion seemed to blend in a somewhat painful uniformity, burst into view. She was a very tall young woman, and she

sat her horse with an ease and grace that carried with it a certain agreeable audacity in which there was mingled a frank, if scarcely unsophisticated, sweetness. She wore a distinctly becoming visor cap secured by a rubber band concealed among the low coils of her abundant hair and set somewhat rakishly above her straw colored locks, and she carried her crop with small regard for elegance, yet with a wholly unconscious achievement of distinction. Her mouth was wide and generous, her nose slightly aquiline, while her chin, by being a trifle too long, marred what would have been otherwise a pleasing contour. At sight of Evelyn she checked her horse, made no effort to restrain the expression of delighted surprise which overspread her features, turned lightly in her saddle, and sprang to the ground.

"At last!" she cried, holding out her hand with a very winning smile and a sort of good-natured *aplomb* that seemed never for an instant to doubt the cordiality of her reception. "It is surely the unexpected which always happens. Not that I haven't wished dozens of times that I might come upon you here. I love this short cut from road to road, but I have taken it again and again for no other reason than the forlorn hope of seeing you. Of course you are Mrs. Merriweather, and my patience is finally rewarded."

"I am Mrs. Merriweather," replied Evelyn, forcing into voice and manner as gracious a response as she could immediately summon, having been taken off guard, and being decidedly mystified as to the identity of the odd young person before her, whose flattering eagerness for her society was something that she was painfully at a loss to account for.

The sudden appearance of the stranger had brought a quick flush into her face, and she looked away a trifle

helplessly in the direction of the road which skirted the estate on the rear, having been until the moment before ignorant of its existence. She was decidedly regretful that it was doubtless one of the main thoroughfares leading into the town, as a steady rumbling of wagons and vehicles broke upon her ears, and she was also wondering vaguely who the unknown young woman could be, when the object of her speculation settled the question at once, and in her own abrupt and breezy fashion.

"I am Maria Douglas," she said, as if the announcement were all-sufficient—and waited.

But still Evelyn's face wore its look of courteous but puzzled inquiry. "You are—you are a relative of Colonel Marshall Douglas?" she asked, tentatively, at length, her natural spontaneity of manner asserting itself as she looked into the young woman's frank, penetrating, yet wholly admiring eyes.

Maria Douglas stared blankly for a moment. Then, throwing a cautious and hasty glance toward the beautiful horse from which she had just dismounted, and which was already peacefully grazing by her side, she broke into a prolonged, hearty laughter that echoed through the forest aisles with a mirth that was as delightful and as unrestrained as if it had proceeded from the mouth of a wood nymph. Its effect, however, gave to her appearance a somewhat Bacchanalian air, since the movement as she threw back her head dislodged several loose hair-pins that fell to the ground and released a long wisp of her waveless, dull-colored hair.

"It is evident, most crushingly evident, that you have never even *heard* of me," she finally cried, between little gasps for breath, and a persistent mopping of the eyes. "I half hoped that she would have mentioned 'me. Of course I have called a number of times, and I always left

cards for you. I rather like her superb disdain. Only if she had mentioned me things would have appeared far less serious. By the way, I am speaking of Mrs. Delafield," she added, as she gathered up the loose strand of hair.

Evelyn hesitated, but the tone was so entirely guiltless of any thought of rudeness that she felt relieved of the obligation of defense. Before she could speak, however, the girl began once more, with a friendly nod of reassurance.

"You guessed correctly. Colonel Douglas and my father are first cousins. Mr. Baylor's mother was Colonel Douglas' sister, which fact, by a very simple process of reasoning, makes Geoffrey and myself full second cousins. And you know in Kentucky"—she suddenly paused and her expression grew arch without being in the least coquettish—"in Kentucky cousins do very often marry."

"Yes, I know."

There was a moment's silence, and again threatening to break forth into the same immoderate laughter, Maria Douglas added:

"It is sometimes a most excellent arrangement—particularly when danger threatens." Then, becoming all at once entirely grave, she pointed to a fallen log just a few steps away.

"Won't you invite me to sit down, Mrs. Merriweather?" she asked. "You would, I am sure, if you had half an idea of how eagerly I have longed to know you. People have told me so much about you, and have described you with such accuracy that I was not an instant in doubt. I knew you as soon as I set eyes upon you. Don't you know how it is when the imagination once begins to weave romantic fancies about persons of whom one has heard

a great deal? The thought of them becomes positively an obsession. I confess to being ordinarily a very prosaic and matter-of-fact sort of individual, yet I have wondered and wondered about you, until I have grown quite to think of you as the lovely, lonely Lady of the Mere. It doesn't matter in the least that there isn't any mere; and of course I knew you were not lonely, because you have always poor dear Mr. Merriweather to look after and to love, and to talk to as much as you please. Still—"

She suddenly broke off, and sat down on the log the two had moved toward as she spoke, fixing her large but rather colorless eyes upon the graceful figure about to be seated beside her.

"I can't help telling you that I think you are lovely, *lovely!*" she exclaimed. "Do you mind?"

"Does a woman ever mind anything so encouraging?"

"I can't say. I honestly do not know; no one ever said anything the least little bit like that to me in all my life," declared the girl, without a shadow of regret in her voice, and with the thoroughly wholesome and voluntary admiration which the plain woman of generous heart and clear, cool intellect freely gives to her physically more favored sisters.

"Sometimes," she continued, surveying the heel of her riding-boot critically as she gently tapped it with her crop, "sometimes I have tried to make myself understand just how it would feel to be really exquisite in every detail as you are, but the effort unsupported by fact in my own case has always proved too great for me. The truth is, while off at school—at Dana Hall, where I have been for the last three years—I was far too busy and too happy to waste time in sighing over my imperfections in the matter of looks; and it is only now, when I am forced to look about me, and also take a careful inventory of all

my rather limited resources, that I begin to realize that beauty has its value. For instance, if I were not so hopelessly lacking in feminine seductiveness, who knows but that my parents and Cousin Marshall Douglas might not accomplish that delightful little plan of theirs?"

"And the plan—?" inquired Evelyn, wincing a little under a turn of conversation that seemed imminent, yet smiling and cordial, while she noted with kindly interest the girl's cool and naïvely impersonal manner of disposing of herself—in which, however, there was not a vestige of humility. On the contrary, there was a sort of cheerful pride coupled with an unusually keen sense of humor that completely saved the remarks from any suggestion of self-pity.

"The plan? Oh, the plan is that I am to marry Geoffrey, of course. I just came home about two weeks ago, else I should have been on the ground much sooner. Cousin Marshall sent for me, or rather, induced my parents to send for me. I was visiting friends in the East, having a most charming time, and certainly innocent before high heaven of any unholy designs upon Geoffrey. Now," she supplemented, drolly, "the sense of responsibility concerning him is a heavy burden upon my soul. It seems, you know, that there is danger that he may lose his heart to Mrs. Delafield, if he hasn't already lost it, and I—I am to circumvent the catastrophe. Please don't look so shocked. Do you think me an altogether dreadful sort of person? I already feel quite as if we had been rocked in the same cradle."

Evelyn smiled amiably. In spite of herself she was diverted. The girl was so young, so frankly ingenuous, yet not without a certain shrewdness of observation and worldly wisdom showing under all her laughing confidences which, notwithstanding the subject of conversation, made

her interesting; and it was impossible to take her seriously.

"We could scarcely have had anything happen to us just like that," she said; "in your cradle days I must have been such a great big girl that to attempt it would have been surely disastrous."

Miss Douglas reflected. "Well, then, I haven't a doubt we are related. Everybody in Kentucky is related to everybody else. Anyway, your great-aunt Chisholm and my grandmother were the best of friends. Mother has told me so. Isn't that a sufficient bond and plea for friendship?"

"Quite."

"Then we shall proceed. And in the first place, please let me explain myself. For some reason Cousin Marshall is violently opposed to Mrs. Delafield. He dislikes women in general and widow-women in particular, and he is simply rabid if I so much as mention her name. My parents, like everybody else's parents, are eager and ready to dispose of me, and I, like the sensible young woman of my day and generation, undisturbed by thoughts of love, am eager and ready to be disposed of. So there you are. There is only one drawback to this pleasant little scheme in prospect. Geoffrey, unfortunately, so far as I am concerned, has revealed himself a laggard in love, and manifests no signs whatever of falling a victim to my charms."

She was infinitely droll as she pronounced the last sentence, and it seemed quite an expected transition when she became all at once a quiet, well-bred young person making a formal inquiry. She turned to Evelyn with one of her abrupt but intensely alive movements.

"I believe you have met my cousin, Mr. Baylor?" she asked simply.

Evelyn reached down and gathered a bit of golden-rod that grew at her feet.

"Yes, I have met him," she said.

"I knew, because the other morning we were discussing you at the breakfast-table."

Evelyn flinched involuntarily, and looked quickly away. With a slow, steady movement she drew the sprig of wild flower again and again through her hand, her eyes turned absently toward the great red sun now sinking into the west. She shivered a little presently as a cool wind swept through the forest, but she only buttoned her jacket closer, and made no attempt to rise. Maria continued.

"Cousin Marshall was carving the chicken, and there was a great bowl of pink chrysanthemums on the table. I was opposite and had to dodge around the chrysanthemums the best I could when I wished to get a look at him. I saw he was particularly gruffy, and I thought I would start up something pleasant. So I asked a question about you. He immediately quoted something from Schopenhauer, and coolly informed me that 'a perfectly true, unsophisticated woman is almost impossible.' You know he is always quoting from that miserable old pessimist, and he makes me want to get down my Ruskin and hear him say, 'O ye queens, ye queens!' Well, that was rather dampening, but I persisted, and I made the discovery that he does really come as near to admiration of you as he could possibly allow himself in the case of anything feminine. He ended up, finally, with a very pointed comparison between you and 'the other one' in which, incidentally, you came off with flying colors."

Evelyn rose, but the girl sat stock-still. Crossing her feet more comfortably, presently she added:

"It was so entirely evident who was meant by 'the other one' that I scarcely dared look at Geoffrey, but I was wild to know how he would take it. When I did turn and look in his direction at last I saw only a granite coun-

tenance staring straight out of the window. Then I made things worse. By that time I was distinctly nervous. 'Don't *you* regard Mrs. Merriweather as a perfectly true, unsophisticated woman?' I asked. At first I thought he hadn't heard me. Then he said in that stern and distant way he sometimes has when troubled or angry, 'I must leave you to form your own conclusion. To a woman a man's opinion of another woman is usually valueless.' I thought I would try him once more. 'At least you will tell me this,' I said: 'Is she beautiful to the poet's eyes?' 'She is beautiful to any eyes,' he said, and then his lips closed like a clam, and not another word could I get from *him*. But I thought it might please you to know that he thinks you beautiful."

Evelyn's face had crimsoned, and she quickly drew down her veil.

"It is very good of you to care what any one thinks of me," she said, avoiding the young girl's eyes. "Please let me thank you. You have made me think how glorious it must feel to be young and strong and happy as you are. How I envy you!"

"Really—*you*? I only hope I haven't bored you. I was only"—the girl suddenly broke off and covered a note of deeper feeling in her voice by a return to her former light banter—"I was only trying to impress you with my own importance. It is not a small distinction to be unexpectedly raised to the high plane of being a rival to the beautiful Mrs. Delafield. Cousin Marshall distinctly has hopes. I heard him chuckling softly to himself an hour ago when he passed Geoffrey and me in the grape arbor. The dear boy had only been saying that he didn't care for watermelon."

She rose and moved toward her horse, threw a saucy glance over her shoulder, and in an instant had sprung

into the saddle. Then, all at once, her expression changed. Her face grew thoughtfully tender. She leaned down to Evelyn with a little warm, sympathetic gesture that tried distinctly to express her compassion for the sorrow written upon the lovely upturned face.

"You are going to let me see you often, aren't you, Mrs. Merriweather?" she said.

"But I so seldom see any one," replied Evelyn, kindly, looking up into the pleasant, ugly face of the girl with genuine liking. "Shall you be at Colonel Douglas's much longer? Possibly some time—here again in these woods, when Mr. Merriweather does not need me—"

She hesitated, realizing how little she might be depended upon. But Maria Douglas leaned down impulsively and put out her hand.

"How good of you!" she exclaimed, heartily. Then she considered. "I don't know how much longer. It depends. Cousin Marshall is in need of a housekeeper. I may spend the winter. Domestic virtues were not sacrificed in my case for the sake of learning. I'm an applicant. Oh, I forgot to tell you this. The other day I asked him a direct question." Her horse was growing restive and she spoke rapidly. "I said, 'Is Geoffrey going to marry Mrs. Delafield?' This was his answer: 'There are only two that can reply to that question—the Lord in Heaven and Mrs. Delafield. Unless brains and youth without beauty can prove itself a match for brains and beauty without youth!'"

Then, with a merry ripple of laughter and a farewell wave of her crop, she turned about and was gone, the fall of her horse's hoofs alone breaking the deep stillness all around and echoing lightly through the chill, darkening woods.

CHAPTER IV

GEOFFREY

NIGHT had descended suddenly. As the red sun dropped into the west the afterglow that for a few moments lingered had shed a weird light upon the leaves and grass and given to the motionless figure still sitting upon the fallen tree the suggestion of something fantastic and unreal—as if, instead of a mortal woman, the genius of the place masquerading in human guise awaited the transformation and surveyed with sad-eyed wonder the gorgeous passing of the autumn day. Then the strange light too had faded, and in its stead there remained only the grayness and grimness of an ancient wood at the twilight time—a chill and somber-tinted earth on which a wan moon looked down in pallid beauty.

The conversation just ended, intruding upon emotions already bordering upon the desperate, had aroused in her a recklessness of rebellion that had passed speedily beyond the restraints of reason and of conscience. The tension of weeks had been lifted, and following upon the momentary relief feelings wild and ungoverned had been crowding upon her, until she stood aghast in the presence of depths in her own nature, hitherto only guessed at, that seemed all at once to be yawning before her and threatening to engulf her will.

The work of reconstruction of character which had partially begun in her through some fineness of nature that enabled her in a measure to grasp the large principle

of sacrifice, of service, appeared to have come to an abrupt standstill. Suddenly, and as it were by a swift process of erasure like the movement of a damp sponge across a closely written slate, everything to which she had bound herself by her recent resolves and efforts had become to her a mere blank, and she was for the moment a being dominated by a single imperious, importunate demand—the demand for certainty in the midst of intolerable doubt.

Not that Maria Douglas had brought into the situation any new element of disturbance. The girl's merry, frank, and spontaneous revelation, her unblushing exposure of matters usually regarded as intimate—save as it served to confirm what Colonel Douglas had already sought to point out to her in relation to Geoffrey and Caroline—had given her small concern, and doubtless in another mood that young woman's unexpected advent would have diminished rather than increased her burden. But in her present frame of mind, despite a wholesome leaning toward the cheerful friendliness which had been held out to her, she was conscious of only a maddening sense of revolt against everything that the recent conversation had stood for.

How was she to endure her life, she asked herself in a sort of horror of dismay, if day by day this agony were to increase in the proportion with which it had grown since that awful moment at the station on her wedding-day?

Hitherto, the constant dread of a possible chance meeting with Geoffrey had seemed to be sapping her vitality like an insidious poison, slow in its workings yet deadly and resistless. Not once had she seen him face to face. During his calls upon Alfred and Caroline, she had always, with a woman's ingenuity, escaped; and so success-

fully had she managed that her action had created no comment other than a mild expression of regret on the part of her young husband and a cool, penetrating stare from Mrs. Delafield.

But to-day there had come a complete reaction against her former desire of avoidance. Her whole being, stung to resistance, rallied and fought for certainty. Something fixed and unequivocal was what she clamored for. And it would seem almost in answer to her soul's stern summons—as if she were about to be granted a reprieve from doubt—that there came a moment later the click of the roadside gate as it slammed, followed immediately by the sound of footsteps growing louder as a man's quick, sure strides advanced steadily through the rustling leaves.

There was only an instant of suspense. But even before she had turned her head something told her that the man approaching in the gloom-haunted wood was Geoffrey. A sense of the inevitable, of being caught up and borne along by some mad wind of destiny that for the moment was to drive them each irresistibly into the presence of the other, brought a look of awe into her features. But otherwise she was distinctly calm.

With a quiet hand she reached for a loose strand of hair that had blown across her face and was bothering her, secured it, and then, turning her body slightly in the direction of the hurrying sound, she sat looking over her shoulder and waiting—motionless, almost unnaturally still, and with something like a smile slightly curving her parted lips.

The place where she sat was distant only a few feet from the little footpath which led through the woods and on, by way of Alfred's domains, to the public road beyond. But Geoffrey, with a preoccupied air and in evident haste,

had reached the spot and passed her by unheeded, when, suddenly, she leaned forward, breathing quickly.

As the realization pierced her that the opportunity she longed for was about to be lost, one of those desperate impulses, which, under pressure, sometimes came to her—and which rendered the matter before her of supreme and compelling import to the disregard of all conflicting claims—seized and drove her headlong.

“Geoffrey!”

With a quick, sob-like cry that voiced in its wild appeal all the unconscious clinging of her tortured soul to a tie that she herself had severed, his name broke from her and she half rose, only to sink back immediately, panting and helpless and horrified at the thing she had done. In the overwhelming shame and confusion which possessed her there was an acute mental recognition that was in itself steady and readjusting.

But her voice was faint and low, and he had barely heard, though he paused and wheeled, his ear caught by something that sounded to his poet's thought like the weird calling of “some spirit lute touched on a spirit sea.” A strange light leaped into his eyes, and for an instant the shadow upon his features lifted. As he stood listening and waiting, lending himself to a half-superstitious fancy, there took place all at once a change in his aspect, surprising, electric, and the Geoffrey of other days seemed to stand for an instant before her in all the splendor of his powerful young manhood—the Geoffrey of the North Carolina mountains, the Geoffrey of the Vision. Then, again, his features hardened, and he strode forward in the darkness. He had caught sight of her, sitting in her grass-green gown upon the fallen tree.

She did not speak nor stir, she seemed scarcely to

breathe; and in the profound silence and stillness which held her one might have almost fancied that under the supreme authority which dominated it the bodily part of her had suffered a suspension of its powers.

For a moment she sat staring, oblivious, tense, her eyes searching his still face in a mute but imperative scrutiny that seemed, in its prolonged questioning, to waive aside as irrelevant everything save the tremendous crisis on which her soul hung. Did he, did he indeed love Caroline? All the pathos and the passion of the inquiry—the result of feelings aroused in her in common with the primal woman fighting despairingly against uncontrollable odds—suddenly struggled to the surface and in an agony of concentration looked forth from her eyes.

For an instant the look lingered. Then her expression became more hurried, more complex. She was thinking, thinking with a rapidity that made thought follow thought like the on-rush of flame on flame. But presently her gaze wavered. Her features relaxed, grew tremulous, tenderly beautiful; while slowly and with a kind of awe at the marvelous spiritual change which she recognized was taking place within herself, something outside of her, something infinitely larger and less personal than her own secret rebellion and inward imperious demand seemed to lay hold of her, and to bear her away into a calm region of safety and to heights hitherto unknown.

In truth, while she gazed, even more startling and heart-rending than had seemed the retrogression she had beheld in him that day at the station, the evident downward trend of his whole being, moral as well as intellectual, smote her as he stood coldly meeting her eyes with a piercing sense of self-accusation and of guilt. And in the midst of the vast pity which possessed her, the great longing she had a moment before felt to hear the sound of his

voice, to receive some sort of assurance through the interchange of ordinary intercourse that the pressure of life, the misfortunes of the common lot, the natural suffering, loss and pain which befall humanity, and not her own act solely, were to be held in part accountable, was swallowed up in a supreme recognition that enabled her, with quivering nerves yet valiantly, to meet the final test of womanhood. She rose.

But he was first to break the silence. "Pardon me, Mrs. Merriweather," he said, formally, "but isn't this rather—ill-advised? These woods at such an hour are scarcely to be recommended to you for nocturnal wanderings."

The stiff, carefully chosen words, so lacking in Geoffrey's usual easy charm of speech, lacerated her spirit like tiny pebbles of wind-blown ice dashed against the soft flesh of one's cheek. She looked away dumbly, helplessly. And this, then, was his first utterance to her since that August night on her aunt's moonlit veranda in North Carolina, when with white and haggard face he had turned from her with the words: "May God forgive you for what you have done, but I—I never will!"

Had he, had he forgiven her? Apparently she was the least in his thoughts to-day, though still working a havoc in his life that was irrevocable. For with the shock which had come to him through her, she knew that not only the fineness and the beauty of all womanhood had suffered, but that the whole structure of human existence, as with simple faith and love he had built it, had tottered beneath the blow which she had given it. So that he stood at last, confused, baffled, miserable, not yet reaching the stage wherein one might begin to reestablish, and with that blight upon him which is more manifest in the case of the naturally trusting and healthful than with any other when

the depths of some awful experience of personal disloyalty have been sounded.

But he was speaking again, and she tried to listen, although his words seemed to come to her from a great way off and in a voice strangely unfamiliar.

"Owing to Alfred's customary good nature he has allowed himself to be imposed upon until this place has become a passage-way for all sorts of nomadic, objectionable persons—some of them of the kind you would decidedly not wish to encounter," he observed, dryly. "If I may offer a suggestion—"

She interrupted. "It is scarcely necessary. I never did it before, and I shall probably not attempt it again. But it seldom occurs to me to be afraid of anything. You know I was always rather reckless."

She had no sooner spoken the words than she regretted them.

"Were you?" he inquired, absently, and in the tone of the entire stranger, his ready acquiescence seeming finally and with carelessness to dismiss the subject.

She bit her lip and again turned her face away from him. There was something almost brutal in his indifference, and she was dismayed.

She had tacitly accepted his escort, and they were moving along the little path under the overhanging boughs side by side, yet with a distance immeasurable and impassable between them. Presently she allowed herself a brief glance in his direction. He was walking with head distinctly erect and with eyes looking straight toward the horizon, and he seemed scarcely conscious of her presence save for a constant watchfulness that sought to shield her from the rougher places on the way. His face was cold and granite-like in its thorough unconcern. For an instant she studied the sturdy, well-remembered profile,

recalling the thrill of pride with which she had once gloried in its manly strength and perfection of outline, and noting with a sudden, shy devoutness that brought a quick glow into her cheeks that, despite the appalling change in him, there was yet an absence of those unmistakable signs which grimly point to a lowering of the personal standard and the devastating life of the sensualist.

"I have just been meeting your cousin, Miss Douglas," she said, presently, through the recognition of the necessity of some sort of speech between them, and becoming aware of the fact that the introduction of a topic would depend on her. It had always been Geoffrey's way, though able when the conversation was once launched to express himself with a rare directness and power, to wait for her lead, and possibly nothing that he could have said or done would have brought the past so vividly and agonizingly before her as the reticence which now left the burden with her. "She was passing through here," she added, quickly, "and she stopped for a few moments with me."

He turned in sharp surprise. "Maria! Here at this time of night! I never dreamed she would do such a thing—a mere girl like that." Then he supplemented quickly, with a short laugh that somehow jarred, "I must see to it that there isn't a repetition, since I am at present one of her chaperons—or at least may claim the prerogative of such distinction."

Evelyn winced. "It was some time ago," she said, coldly. "I am sure that there could not have been the smallest objection. Besides, she was on horseback."

His face softened. "Oh, on horseback. Well, I'm glad of that. It means she has found an entirely harmless and successful way of entertaining herself. Unfor-

tunately, there isn't much to amuse her here under the roof of a crochety old man and an almost equally crochety young one."

"She seemed thoroughly amused."

He let the subject fall.

"She rides like a person that really delights in the exercise—loves it," Evelyn persisted, "and she had such a beautiful horse."

His expression had again grown absent. "I daresay she does delight in it—love it, as you say. I have no doubt that she would tell you in her own vernacular that she is quite crazy about it."

"But she didn't tell me anything of the kind. Only I knew, and I—I envied her."

He turned slightly toward her. "Was it the horse that you coveted or the rider that you envied?" he asked, gravely, but with a slightly cynical smile.

"It was both."

He laughed again—that same abrupt, puzzling laugh that seemed coldly to accent the distance between them. "Any of us, I suppose, might envy an embodied joy."

"Nothing so sweet and wholesome and fresh-hearted in the way of womankind has come to me for many a day," she declared, abruptly, and with a sudden catch in her voice. She was conscious that she was breathing quickly and that her face had flushed. But with the recognition that she had suddenly been driven into an attitude of defense, her lips all at once curled with a wan smile. "I think her lovely—lovely," she added, low under her breath, and scarcely conscious that she was but echoing words applied just a little before to herself.

He was looking straight ahead of him, his gaze now turned toward the many lights, twinkling through the

branches, of the great white house they were approaching.

"Yes, she is lovely, very lovely," he said slowly and decisively. Then his manner slightly changed. It became less constrained and a trifle more friendly. "You spoke of the horse my cousin was riding. Alfred has one of the same pedigree. You know he has the finest stable in the county. Mrs.—Delafield is almost as fond of riding as my cousin is."

The slight hesitation did not escape her sensitive ear, nor did the instant relapse into a greater formality than he had yet used at the mention of Caroline's name fail of a piercing suggestion. It was evident that he had stumbled upon a subject that he decidedly preferred to avoid and did not desire to continue; for he suddenly set his teeth hard, and, with a gesture of dismissal, took a step or two forward, holding the orchard gate wide for her as she passed, but without a word or glance and with the manner of one who performs a necessary courtesy for the simple reason that it is necessary, and not for an instant because he has the smallest regard for its recipient, or intention of rendering himself thereby agreeable.

But the sense of shock which his words gave her made her brain reel. The unexpected reference to Caroline had left her staggering as beneath a blow. With the mysterious alteration that was taking place in her point of view toward him as she continued to study his worn, unhappy countenance, there had come once more the acute and startling recognition that self was slowly receding from her, leaving her at last dominated by a supreme, absolutely controlling desire—a desire that was single to his welfare and that translated itself into the immediate

but profoundly earnest hope that even yet she might see him become the strong soul she had known him to be, and thus finally restored to all the splendor of his lost estate.

This longing, strengthened by whatever was noblest in her own nature and inspired by some gleam from that far-off Vision whose divine radiance had for her, never really faded, albeit she had willfully closed her eyes to it, marked the first moment of that inward consecration which was to assume in time the dignity of an apotheosis. And though she still wished with all the intensity of her rashly ardent nature for something that might reveal the exact relation which existed between himself and Caroline, it was for a reason very different from the one which half an hour before had made her eager to the point of desperation for such knowledge. Had he manifested in the young girl they had been discussing anything approaching a lover's interest, she felt, in the first rush of the new, exalted feeling which now possessed her, that out of sheer thankfulness of heart for the rescue she could ultimately have risen to a patient and peaceful acquiescence. But Caroline! The thought of the sacrifice of his magnificent powers to a woman of her kind was a torture. All at once she turned toward him. And then, as if she had been only slowly pondering his last remark, she said, very quietly,

"My sister-in-law and I are still almost strangers. Many of her tastes and preferences doubtless are quite unknown to me. She is very unlike her brother."

"Very."

The frigid, laconic utterance was not conducive to further comment, but she continued. She even smiled a little with an enforced gayety as she looked bravely toward his averted face.

"One of the surface differences, something that strikes one at once, is her more careful speech—so unlike his dear 'slip-shod manner and peculiar way of dropping off his final syllables."

"She has spent much of her life abroad. She speaks several languages besides her own quite fluently."

There was a moment's hesitation before she spoke again.

"You have known her a long, long time?"

"A long time," he replied, gravely and formally.

"And Mr. Delafield? Did you know him also a long, long time?"

His face changed quickly, and a sudden frown darkened it.

"I had only a slight acquaintance with Mr. Delafield. He was not a person when I knew him, at least, that one would care particularly to cultivate."

"And yet she married him."

"When she married him doubtless he was different."

Once more he set his teeth hard as if done with the subject.

Her pride suffered an agony in its eclipse, and there was a sudden sounding as of the roar of many waters in her ears, but her purpose did not waver. All at once she paused and pointed.

"That is your path, and I shall go in by the side door there. Thank you very much for your protection." Then she added quickly, and quite naturally, despite her heart's painful pounding,

"It is a fine test, perhaps the only test, to have known a person a long, long time. Do you admire her greatly?"

He turned and met her eyes without a flicker as the single word fell from his lips.

"Greatly," he said, and bowing he turned and left her.

CHAPTER V

A GAME OF BRIDGE

DINNER had been over for half an hour or more. A cheerful wood fire blazed in the little up-stairs library, and the warm, softly lighted room seemed cozily attractive in view of a rapid change of temperature that had given to the October night the prospect of an exceedingly heavy frost and made one aware, even behind heavily built walls, that autumn, lagging hitherto, had now seriously started on its way.

Alfred shivered a little in his sensitive, nervous fashion, and at a glance from Caroline young Ascot, who with but little urging had consented to spend the night, rose and wheeled the cumbersome chair of the invalid a trifle nearer the fire.

"Not too close, old boy," Alfred called out in his blithe, undaunted way, "it will be confounded hot in here before we know it, with the furnace going too."

Hugh Ascot paused and considered the matter with a seriousness that was characteristically ponderous as he stood a moment looking down upon the maimed and helpless form before him, his six feet of height and his heavy robust frame making a painful contrast that he himself was all at once dimly aware of, for he suddenly turned away and with an odd, slinking movement sank almost apologetically into the nearest chair.

"Then presently I'll turn the furnace off," he said, very quietly, and in a tone of voice that few of his associates would have recognized. More than once during

the afternoon and evening, when his slow, measuring gaze had rested thoughtfully upon his friend, there had come a suspicious moisture into his eyes, and the man of iron, accustomed to rule his fellows by a firm, cool, and perhaps not always over-scrupulous hand instigated by a certain native shrewdness of intellect that had enabled him to become an expert at the game of politics as played in his own state, had suddenly grown soft-hearted and tender as a woman.

They were awaiting Evelyn, and the three were seated around a small table in the center of the room that had been cleared. Caroline, in a black evening gown that cleverly revealed the delicately rounded outline of her form and gave a statuesque beauty to the intense whiteness of her neck and throat, was toying absently with a pack of cards, giving only a scant attention to the conversation between her brother and his guest, and glancing from time to time impatiently in the direction of the doorway. A faint arching of her brows, indicating that her thoughts were occupied far more with Evelyn, who was unreasonably delaying them, than with either of the two, betrayed an annoyance she was at but little trouble to conceal. She had seldom been known to keep a person waiting, promptness being something that she absolutely demanded of herself as well as of others; and she was by no means tolerant of such delinquency when compelled to be the victim of another's tardiness.

But it was not merely because of the slight vexation of the moment that her thoughts were turned on this particular evening with a special captiousness in the direction of her sister-in-law. Her dislike of Evelyn which had begun long before there had seemed even a remote possibility of the relationship which now existed between them, and which had increased steadily from the first hour of

their meeting, to-day had reached a sort of climax, and with the culmination the deliberate plan to which she gave all the energies of her powerful and skillful being not only strengthened but took on an added zest—the zest of cruelty and the desire to torture.

Presently she looked up. The conversation had turned into a different channel. She was not concerned, but something in the tones of Ascot's voice caught her ear. He was speaking very gently, and he seemed to be throwing his whole soul into Alfred's situation with a concentration of interest in his affairs that surprised and held her admiration.

Heretofore, she had not found it difficult to believe that Ascot's interest in her brother had been merely a reflex of his admiration of herself. But this was different. Apparently he had forgotten her very existence even, and seeing him thus, detached, as it were, and unaffected by any influence of her presence, she felt that she had gained an altogether new perspective. Her gaze grew fixed and wondering. The young man's clumsy but forceful physique held her as if she were seeing him with wholly altered eyes. The suggestion of reserve strength in the rugged bronze countenance, the cool, penetrating eye, the flash of the strong white teeth, in short, his whole crude, elementary, and striking personality filled her for the instant with an admiration that she had not hitherto felt. It was practically the first moment in which she had ever thought to take him seriously.

The impression he made upon her as he sat talking with her brother, emphasizing his remarks with an occasional unpleasant pounding upon the table, and from time to time tilting back in his chair in a way that threatened his equilibrium and set her teeth on edge, was, it is true, mixed as it had always been; only to-night the

proportion was strangely different: it was three parts admiration to one part disgust, whereas formerly disgust had had the major part in whatever consideration she had deigned to bestow upon him.

"Don't sell it out to the first fellow who happens to come along and wants to get it at half its value," Ascot was saying when she finally relaxed a little in her concentrated stare and leaned back in her chair with something of her old insolent indifference and condescension of manner. "At least keep a string tied to it, whatever you do. Why, hang it, man, what on earth are you going to have to think about, cooped up here, like a rabbit in a hutch?"

Alfred flinched a little, and on the slender, highbred face there showed a faintly perceptible revolt. But a moment afterward he had turned his face lit with loyal devotion to his friend. Ascot's occasional lapses in decorum and his obtuseness, while they offended his finer sensibilities, were far from alienating or seriously disturbing him. He shook his head.

"Nevertheless, I shall sell it," he said, very quietly.

But Ascot failed to perceive the slight note of reserve which had crept into the words.

"Sell it!" he exclaimed. "Give it is what you are evidently planning to do. Take my advice and hold on to it. I always contended that the *Eagle* had a future of its own, if only you had been able to buckle down to the hardship and incessant toil of a daily newspaper."

"But you know I never could," responded Alfred, with one of his whimsical, wholly lovable smiles that made one ready on the instant to forgive his shortcomings, however great.

"Put a good business man on a salary at the head of it. It might interest you to write an occasional edi-

torial," persisted Ascot, wholly unconscious of the fact that he was treading on dangerous ground.

Again Alfred shook his head. For a little while he was silent. Caroline shuffled the cards, and her face as she bent it above them grew suddenly strained. Presently Alfred drew a deep breath.

"I am out of the game, old fellow," he said, at length. "It wouldn't be any use. I should only mix things up. The person who hopes to do anything in a newspaper way with local politics must be right in the thick of it. You know I never was. And now—"

He all at once broke off and his voice shook a little. Ascot put out his hand, and once more a tear glistened in his eye.

Upon Alfred's good-natured, boyish face—still boyish despite the recent marks upon it—there came a quick change of expression, and he gave a slight start as of surprise. For a moment he stared steadily at the other.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, at last. "It's all *right*, you understand. I am not bothering, not in the least." He hesitated a moment, and then went on quickly, "I wasn't the kind ever to do much; I am not like you. Besides," he looked away shyly, his pride contending with his embarrassment, "besides, I've got—I've got the very biggest thing in life—I've got *Evelyn*! Nothing else seems to matter greatly."

For an instant the look upon Caroline's features, hitherto slightly indefinite, became a very real thing, reflecting a mingled scorn and pity. For the briefest possible space it lingered. Then her face grew calm. She raised it and met his eyes.

"Yes," she said, carelessly, with a ripple of silvery laughter, "you have Evelyn, but where is she? Shall I go for her? You know you are to play for only a little

while, else you will be too nervous to sleep. Perhaps she doesn't realize that she has kept us waiting for more than a quarter of an hour."

"I am so sorry; I completely forgot that we were to play." Evelyn's voice at her elbow surprised and startled her. She flushed quickly and with annoyance as she slowly turned. But before she could make any answer Alfred broke in, being the first to recover speech. Evelyn's noiseless entrance was a distinct *contretemps*.

His eyes rested in amused inquiry and with furtive admiration upon the graceful figure in white standing beside the chair on his right. Then he threw back his head and shouted with laughter as his gaze wandered from her to Ascot, and from him to Caroline.

"Forgot! By Jove, that's a good one on us, isn't it?"

"What recalled us to your preoccupied thoughts? Not a guilty conscience, surely?" asked Caroline, slowly raising her eyes from the cards spread out before her.

Evelyn was a trifle slow in replying. She smiled pleasantly toward Alfred and young Ascot, and with a slight bow to the latter in recognition of her acceptance of him as her partner in the game, she took the vacant chair awaiting her. She had paled a little, but otherwise she was so absolutely self-possessed one might have almost fancied she had not heard.

But Caroline had noted what neither of the others had perceived, and the sudden pallor upon the warmly beautiful face had not escaped her eyes. Her gaze did not relax. She waited coolly.

All at once Evelyn turned squarely about. And then, without a shadow of reluctance, but with an extreme formality, she looked directly and steadily into the eyes bent almost threateningly upon her. Her manner was serenely

courteous and her voice peculiarly calm when, after what seemed a strangely long time, she spoke.

"What reminded me?" she asked, with one of her slowly breaking smiles. "It was what usually reminds me, and it has been known to wake me out of sleep, and to summon me in the midst of the most absorbing things. It was simply the thought of Alfred's comfort."

Caroline's tone grew ominously suave and playful.

"And the thought of Alfred's comfort, which evidently did not include a thought for Mr. Ascot's comfort and my own, was not inspired by the promptings of a sense of guilt? I had rather supposed it was."

"Have I not sufficiently apologized?"

Alfred cut in gayly.

"See here, now, you two. Don't stop to gabble. Let's begin to play. Remember my time is short."

Caroline's face changed. The cold, glittering smile upon it, like sunlight shining on snow, faded suddenly. For an instant her glance rested with a fierce intensity of affection upon the pathetic figure opposite, and with something in the look suggestive of the ferocity of a tigress guarding its young. Then her expression grew nonchalant. She handed the cards to Ascot.

"Shuffle them, please," she commanded. "I have all the hearts in one place."

Ascot roared.

"It would be better to have one heart in the right place, wouldn't it?" he demanded, clumsily, as he darted a daring look into her eyes.

She disdained to take even the smallest notice. Pleasantries of such an order, the resort of the socially crude and the unenlightened, were an offense equally to her fastidiousness and to her intellect.

"I believe we are fairly well matched," remarked Alfred, presently, as the cards were being dealt. "But you needn't," he added with a nod to Caroline, "be quite so cock-sure of winning this time. You know you usually are like that when we two put up a game. But old Hugh over there can play to beat the band, and Evelyn isn't half a bad player, even though she does detest bridge."

His enthusiasm and pleasure were almost childlike, touching in their trustfulness and in their entire simplicity. Of the four persons seated about the table he only was free from care, he only was happy. His cheerfulness radiated through the room and filled it completely.

To this also Caroline made no response. Her head was bent thoughtfully over her cards, and she showed no disposition to open her mouth save to make the necessary remark a moment later.

But the game had progressed but little before it became evident that all the powers of her being were enlisted. She was playing with the utmost deliberation and with an intensity of concentration that made her oblivious to everything save the matter before her. At one or two brilliant plays from Evelyn, cleverly followed up by Ascot, she suddenly bit her lips and lowered her head. The situation had narrowed itself down strangely. It had become something more than a mere game of chance that she was participating in. It was not an ordinary contest in skill. It was to be a fight for domination, a combat between herself and Evelyn; and as the idea more and more took hold of her the feeling it aroused in her was tremendous, provoking her to the fullest extent.

She had been cool, guarded, splendidly adroit, and Alfred had been playing most skillfully, yet at the end of half an hour they had lost steadily.

Presently the young politician, at a moment's intermission, tilted back his chair and laughed uproariously, being in the best of spirits and moreover flushed with victory. It was a somewhat unfortunate flaunting of the flag. Instantly there was a slight constraint, and Alfred quickly leaned forward and spoke to Evelyn.

"Did the walk tire you, dearest? You look so pale."

Caroline turned her head. She looked searchingly into the face of her sister-in-law.

"You are not a very rapid walker, are you?" she said, at length.

"I?" Evelyn asked, innocently. "Oh, yes, ordinarily. Why?"

"I noticed from my window you and Mr. Baylor as you came strolling in. One might have taken you for a pair of lovers."

Alfred's eyes opened wide. "Oh, were you with Baylor, Evelyn? Why on earth didn't you bring him in? I'm so glad he found you in the woods."

Evelyn's eyes were lowered, but her voice was entirely controlled.

"He was passing through, and he offered me his protection. It was late, and it seems I had done a rather indiscreet thing."

"Undoubtedly," responded Caroline, with an unpleasant smile. "One never goes there after nightfall."

"It was quite early when I went, and I simply forgot to come back, that is all," said Evelyn, dismissing the subject with a quiet dignity against which the other, acutely conscious of the tone in which the words were uttered, made no effort to strive. A sudden painful recognition of baldness in her manner of attack, a baldness that was particularly apparent as contrasted with Evelyn's ex-

quisite polish of speech and manner, brought her to a sharp, surprised standstill. It was an altogether new sensation to one well practiced in subtleties, and in a more delicate form of fencing.

Once more they began to play. But the tide of fortune had turned. For the next half hour Alfred and Caroline were the winners, and upon the invalid's face there had come a flush of pleased excitement. Caroline had grown deadly pale. She watched the clock on the mantel anxiously, her eyes wandering toward it again and again in doubtful inquiry. The time would soon be up.

"I think you might stay for a quarter of an hour longer than usual," she said, with a quick glance into her brother's face. "You know we couldn't begin to-night until after eight."

"We must stop at half-past nine." Evelyn's voice, very low yet firm, had a ring of finality in it that echoed strangely through the little room, and that seemed suddenly to reveal her in a new light—that of one invested with a serious and sacred authority. "I promised Dr. Beverley that Alfred should never play later than half-past nine," she added, as if denying the matter all further comment.

There was an instant of painful tension. Hugh Ascot's slow, penetrating gaze rested with peculiar interest upon the beautiful wife of his friend. Uncomfortably ill at ease in her presence, until that moment he had had scarcely a glimmering of what she really stood for. Accustomed to Caroline's audacious assumption of the right to control, and prepared always to expect the eclipse of every other woman in her presence, the effect of the few quietly spoken words was to make him look from one to

the other in an astonishment that held him speechless, and that was almost amusingly reflected upon his broad bronze countenance. The disturbance which even he now felt was in the air was heightened rather than diminished by Alfred's tactful, but unsuccessful attempt to ignore; just as the unhesitating response of the latter was a still further surprise. Alfred spoke quickly.

"It seems that I am not to have much to say to all this," he said, with a disconcerting smile, "and as for old Hugh, he also is evidently not in it." Then he added staunchly, "But we'll yield to Evelyn. We'll stop—when the clock strikes the half hour."

There was no dissent. The room grew very quiet. A faint sputtering of the hickory logs and now and then a brief exclamation from one or the other of the two men alone broke the stillness. The two women were absolutely silent.

Despite her nerve and coolness, the extraordinary zeal with which Caroline had played had communicated itself gradually to each of the other players, and they had lent themselves to the game with an absorption that had now become absolute. A few moments more and the strain would be lifted, and they all, save one, would be ready to refer to it with a laugh and a jest.

Presently Caroline's lips closed tightly. She caught in her breath, threw a startled glance into her brother's face, and studied her hand fiercely. Five more minutes passed. She was playing desperately. Then her expression changed. Already she foresaw the end.

A moment later a painful awkwardness descended upon the group.

All at once one of the logs back of the big brass andirons rolled heavily forward, and Ascot sprang to his feet, gravely welcoming the diversion. In the same mo-

ment Alfred's laughter rang out, light, nervous, and distinctly overstrained.

"Beaten, by Jupiter! And there's that blamed clock striking the half hour!" he exclaimed, as Caroline, very white and still, slowly rose from the table.

CHAPTER VI

A CLIMAX

"WHAT shall I read to you?"

Alfred raised his eyes. For a moment they rested in the abandonment of a mute and wholly absorbing adoration upon the tall figure bending over him; then his gaze wavered. He turned away his head.

"Don't read anything—just sit down here by me and let me look at you," he said, presently, with a sudden catch in his voice.

He had been made comfortable for the night, and Evelyn in a loose pink gown of soft silk and lace stood at his bedside, alternately smoothing his pillows and tucking the coverlet warmly about him, the operation being several times repeated and with the special care which she always gave to every detail bearing upon his possible physical easement. In her scrupulous attention to all such matters, and in her prompt willingness to sacrifice herself to them in every conceivable way, there was, despite a seeming ironic suggestion, a very real tenderness that, apart from the profound spirit of atonement which possessed her and unaffected by it, made her eager, through a process of simple womanly feeling, to do for him what she could. Through a constant realization of the appalling tragedy which had befallen him, the thought that she was in any sense his wife had gradually ceased its hold upon her; and it was only in such moments as these,

when his young manhood seemed to cry out in bitterness of revolt against his fate that she was brought back to an acute and startling consciousness of the actual relation which existed between them.

She had flushed painfully at the look he gave her, and as the slow crimson dyed her cheek and neck and brow, her eyelids drooped, and she sat quivering under a sense of intolerable shame and remorse. She spoke quickly and embarrassedly.

"But wouldn't it be better? It would help to quiet you. The game was far too exciting. I dare not think of what Dr. Beverley would say."

He answered almost irritably. "Oh, hang Beverley! How would he feel to be—like this? How would any man feel?" A look of anguish contorted his features, and once more she dropped her eyes. "There are times," he continued, his hot-blooded resentment striking out wildly against the first object which happened to present itself, like a child venting itself upon even the hand which would attempt to restore it to a lost equilibrium, "there are times when I should like to take Beverley by the throat and throttle him."

"He is always so kind, and he is so—wonderful," she responded, seeking by a special calm of manner and a complete ignoring of his mood to soothe a restlessness that she saw bade fair to keep him sleepless through the night.

"He is really one of the most remarkable combinations I have ever known," she persisted, "and in spite of his oddities and his abruptness, and his almost brutal frankness, it is easy to see that his is the strength which is born only of a great gentleness."

His face, flushed and mutinous, all at once reflected a change of expression. He looked up a trifle absently.

Then the strained expression suddenly relaxed, and he broke into a laugh.

"Beverley?" he inquired, indifferently. "Oh, he's all right, of course. There can't be any two opinions about Beverley. He is one of the people I swear by—always did, ever since we were little kids and he rescued me from one of Caroline's tantrums. It was an attempt at murder. She was about to make away with me with a red-hot poker, and—would you believe it?—after it was all over he took her on his knee and spanked her, while our mother sat by smiling. Do you know," all at once his laughter rang out, merry and irresponsible, "I honestly think she has detested him ever since."

Evelyn sat thoughtfully stroking her left arm, bare below the elbow. She seemed scarcely to hear or to know that his eyes feasted upon her.

"I am so glad you like him, dearest," he said, at length, still with that hurt, dumb look which she shrank from, but with an evident effort to speak cheerfully. "Now tell me what did you think of Ascot?"

"I liked him and I didn't like him."

"To which side did you incline the more?"

"Oh, to the side of liking, I suppose. He is big-hearted and kind-hearted and not exactly dull. Nevertheless, I couldn't help fancying that he would be equal to doing all sorts of horrible things if once he believed they were needed to advance his political ends."

Alfred reflected. "Well—he would, if the truth were told. As a matter of fact, he has done them. But they are all like that, darling, more or less, the politicians of our present day. By the way, he's a great admirer of Baylor's. You must get Geof to tell you what he thinks about him. Of course you will see a great deal of Baylor now—if Caroline doesn't happen to want him all the time.

In that case," he chuckled boyishly, "in that case—you won't. Did you happen to observe that she wouldn't even deign to look at Ascot? That was rather expressive. And yet Ascot would suit her a whole lot better than Baylor. She'd know how to play to Hugh's game better by a long sight than she would to Geoffrey's, for there isn't a bit of the ideal in her, and Washington would just suit her—and the end of it would be the United States Senate before any one knew what she was about. Pity she's such a blamed fool and won't see it, isn't it."

"I—I really cannot say."

Evelyn rose and walked over to the bookshelves. He was in the mood, she knew, to rattle on like that for hours, with the result of a splitting nervous headache on the morrow and a depression of spirits out of which his natural sweetness of disposition and his usually patient acceptance of his lot would be unable to rise. She had grown deadly pale. The burden of the part which she must play before him and of the secret which she must maintain had become insupportable. With the larger living into which she was daily growing, and with the consequent increased sincerity of soul which made even a shadow of dissimulation distasteful to her in the highest degree, the fact that there must be always a part and a secret had begun to weigh heavily upon her and to constitute an almost unendurable penalty. But Alfred must never know. Her desperate thought to sever the bond between them and her contemplated flight were things that must forever remain locked in her own unhappy breast as imperishable memories of a profound and awful experience. Presently she turned. She had grown calm, and once more her voice sounded serene and natural.

"I had meant to bring you something of Yeats to-night. You know I simply have to educate you to the point of

making you care for a few other things besides those modern historical novels you so much delight in."

"What were you going to give me?"

"The Land of Heart's Desire."

He caught up the title eagerly. His face lighted. "The Land of Heart's Desire!" he repeated, softly and dreamily. "Why, how beautiful that is, Evelyn! And wouldn't it be lovely to go in search of it, even if it took one to the ends of the earth? Darling, we—we would have found it, wouldn't we, if I hadn't been tied up here a helpless lump of humanity, unable to take a step."

She did not answer, and presently he added very soberly and quietly, "I rather think we *have* found it—in spite of everything. Only sometimes you look so sad. But get the book, dearest, let's have a little of it."

"This is not the best night for it. We'll try something else. Let me see what you have here."

He broke into a laugh. "Well, if you want to make me go to sleep, if that's what you are after—there's a copy of Geoffrey's 'Psyche' there, or ought to be. Suppose you bring that. Poetry is not in my line as a rule, but I do honestly like that—at least, I should like to go to sleep hearing you read it."

"It isn't here." Her voice had grown harsh and strange, so that he started a little at sound of it and slightly raised himself.

"Not there? Look again. It must be."

She was standing with her back toward him, and she did not turn. Again she shook her head.

He sank back resignedly. "Then Caroline has carried it off, or the servants have mislaid it. Never mind. Poetry is something of a bore, anyway, even when Baylor writes it, although his is of rather the better sort." He pondered a moment. "Is the 'Tale of Two Cities' there?"

"Yes." Her eyes quickly swept the shelf with its curious conglomeration.

"Then, since you don't care much for the modern historical sort, we'll try that."

Evelyn took the book from the shelf, placed the lamp where the light from it would not hurt his eyes, and sat down. She began to read. Now and then the hand that turned the pages trembled slightly, and at first her voice went haltingly. It had been a hard day and evening, and she felt faint and exhausted, but presently she forced herself to a tone of voice that in reading seldom failed to quiet him; and gradually his eyelids began to droop. He opened them and looked unsteadily at her.

"Evelyn, will you kiss me?" he said. "I think I am going to sleep pretty soon. But don't call Sam for a bit. Stay with me a little while longer."

She put down the book. Then she slowly rose and stood beside him. There were tears in his eyes, but through them he smiled bravely up at her.

She bent down and kissed him reverently on the brow, and her own tears mingled with his. But when she spoke her voice sounded serene and natural, and she went quickly back to her seat, ignoring her emotion and his.

"Call Sam? No, indeed, dear; I haven't a thought of it. I am going to stay with you a long, long time. Now, let me go on with this."

She began to read again, just as if she believed him to be wide awake and interested, although making her voice very soft and low, and throwing as little animation as possible into the narrative, so that once more the quiet, monotonous tone soothed him to repose.

She had read scarcely more than five minutes before he was asleep. But she kept unwaveringly on, fearing to pause or to move lest she should wake him. Half an

hour passed. She raised her eyes and looked at him. He was lying with one arm thrown back of his head, and he was sleeping as peacefully as a little child. Infinitely touched, she crept softly toward the bed and stood looking down upon him. The traces of tears still lingering upon the pale young face smote her with a compassion that shook her to the very heart's center. She stood for a long time. All at once great heavy breaths struggled up in her, and she sank down on her knees beside him, stifling her sobs in the bed-clothing.

Presently the clock in the hall struck twelve. Stiff and wearied, she rose, moved quietly into the next room to remind the man-servant who was to remain with Alfred through the rest of the night that she was leaving, and passed out into the hall.

As she approached Caroline's apartments, she was surprised to find the door of the latter's bedroom slightly ajar and her lights still burning. Evelyn moved softly past in the direction of her own room, making scarcely a sound, and hurrying, through a sudden painful apprehension that there might be something premeditated in the fact that Caroline was not sleeping. In the overwrought condition of her nerves the feeling that her movements were being spied upon, and that she herself was possibly awaited, made her proudly eager for an escape into privacy.

But Caroline's ears were keen. Evelyn had advanced but a few steps further down the dimly lighted hall before the slightly open door was flung wide, and Caroline stood on the threshold. She was in a white negligée, and the softly clinging garment revealing the firm throat and perfect arms gave a look of Greek-like beauty to the exquisitely modeled face and form. A curious smile played over her features—a smile strangely illuminating, yet sin-

ster, and under its peculiar radiance Evelyn all at once drew back as in the presence of something weird and diabolic—as if some old-world magic, baneful, dire, lurked in any sort of contact with the mysterious, silent woman before her. For an instant the eyes of the two met, and then with merely a slight inclination of the head and a murmured good night, Evelyn was moving on to her own room when Caroline took a step or two forward. She laughed softly.

“I have been going over the household accounts, and I only a few moments ago finished with them. Won’t you come in, please? I have something to tell you.”

Evelyn paused. “Won’t it keep until to-morrow?” She threw an anxious glance over her shoulder, and fearful lest Alfred should be awakened by the sound, she hesitated.

Caroline’s only reply was to fling the door wider open. Within, a smoldering wood fire burned upon the hearth, and the large room with its old-fashioned Southern furnishings was pleasant and restful in the soft light. She moved lightly across the intervening space in her scarlet bedroom slippers, and, shivering a little, sank into the great chair beside the fire. Then she called gayly to Evelyn still on the threshold, “Just a moment, please. I shan’t keep you.” She pointed to the rocking-chair opposite.

Evelyn reluctantly accepted it. She passed her hand wearily across her brow and pushed back the heavy bronze hair above it. “I—I am a little tired,” she said, with distant courtesy and in a tone intended to be delicately suggestive. “He was restless, and I have been reading to him,” she added.

“Oh, yes—that interminable reading. I have just been wondering how great must be the affection that can stand

the strain of such unceasing self-abnegation. You do it every night, you know."

"Yes, I do it every night."

"I wonder how long you will be able to keep it up?"

"Always, I hope."

Caroline's face hardened. Her hands suddenly clenched.

"You mean as long as Alfred lives? That may not be, after all, such a very long time. It is difficult to imagine that under present conditions he will live to a great age. Still—he may. In that case are you quite sure that your duties will never become a nuisance?"

"I am quite sure that I shall not regard them as a nuisance," responded Evelyn, coldly.

Caroline leaned forward, and the expression still lingering upon her features changed to something acute and scrutinizing. Her gaze grew boldly insolent.

"Why, how ill and worn you look!" she exclaimed, at length. "Nothing is a greater blight upon one's beauty than nursing, and then, of course, if one adds the element of personal anxiety—"

Evelyn sat up. "You have something to say to me?" she asked, looking the other squarely in the eyes, and at the same time making a movement of departure. "May I suggest again that you wait until to-morrow? I—I am a little tired."

Caroline leaned back more comfortably in the warm, heavily padded chair. She slowly raised her hands and clasped them back of her head, the short, loose sleeve falling away and baring her small, beautifully rounded arms. For a moment she sat gazing steadily into the fire. Then she coolly turned her head.

But Evelyn had risen and was moving toward the door. Midway she wheeled. All at once something of her old

spontaneous charm of manner returned to her—something that, while granting a seeming concession, still wrapped her in an exquisite reserve. A slow smile overspread her features.

"Do pardon me," she said, "but I simply can't stay any longer. You know how it usually is when two women begin to talk at this hour of the night. But if it is something about the housekeeping, don't feel you need to speak of it. Please don't feel that you need ever to consult me."

A look of quiet scorn traced itself upon Caroline's features—the scorn of the woman who delights in authority and who has, therefore, little understanding of the one who deliberately waives her own rights and privileges.

"It was not about the housekeeping," she responded, obscurely.

"Then, surely it will keep until to-morrow?"

Evelyn's voice had become sweet and almost playful, despite its note of mastery.

To Caroline the tone was enraging. She rose.

"There is really no reason why it should not keep indefinitely," she said, "so far as any discussion of it between us is concerned." She paused, and then fixing her eyes searchingly upon Evelyn's unsuspecting face the words fell icily from her lips.

"I had only to say that I am going to be married—to Mr. Baylor. I thought possibly the announcement might interest you."



PART IV,

**“EARTH CHANGES, BUT THY SOUL
AND GOD STAND SURE”**



CHAPTER I

CHRISTMAS EVE

SNOW had fallen steadily for hours, and by five o'clock in the afternoon the ground was so heavily covered that Mrs. Madison had begun to despair of receiving more callers. Despite her weight of years, and the fact that the day had been one long excitement since first she opened her eyes, she was still by no means wearied; and she sat enthroned in her great chair by the fire, idly turning the pages of a novel—one of the particularly light and sentimental order—and awaiting the next arrival with a look of increasing disappointment upon her cheery, comely countenance whenever her glance wandered in the direction of the door of her drawing-room, the threshold of which had not been passed by any one for the last ten minutes or more.

She had caught the spirit of merrymaking floating like an airy, glittering thing over the old Southern town, and all day she had been as alive and eager as an expectant little child awaiting the fulfillment of its Santa Claus dream. Since eleven in the morning her home, one of the most picturesque and interesting of Lexington's ancient landmarks, with its beautiful old portraits, and antique furniture, its quaint candelabra and sconces, its great dinner service of Bohemian glass and gold—designed originally for royalty—its fine porcelain and massive silver, had been gayly decked with Christmas greens, and through the greater part of the day the large firelit rooms

had resounded with the pleasant greetings of friends and lent themselves, with the easy abandonment which even inanimate objects seem able on occasions to assume, to a joyous and purely spontaneous keeping of the great festival.

Her visitors had included persons of all ages. Elderly gentlemen and ladies, bringing with them the aroma of a courtly past, had bowed in stately fashion over her outstretched hand and wished her all the blessings that Heaven can bestow; while the middle-aged and even the most youthful had found time in the midst of their active preparations for the morrow to run in upon her for a little time in order that they might pay to her the tribute which long custom had ordained, and which, it should be said, she somewhat autocratically desired.

It was the young in whom she felt most interest. She loved their gay, excited laughter and the audacious sparkle of their eyes; and she was herself so charming in black velvet and lace, with her white hair piled high in the fashion of a French marquise of the old régime, and with her round, smooth face into which an almost girlish pink was wont to rise that it is needless to say they admired her with an extravagance that more than equaled her own, when she came forward at these delightful times to welcome them.

There was, however, one notable exception among those who, so to speak, constituted her retinue. Caroline Delafield was indifferent alike to her soft philosophy of life and her reminiscent coquetry. The phrases were Caroline's own, and to her mind particularly accurate—the philosophy being in her opinion of a distinctly milk-and-water kind, and the coquetry savoring of a vanity too prodigious to be encouraged. Moreover, old persons of Mrs. Madison's order, who were disposed to exact for

themselves a too distinguished courtesy, were likely to become a nuisance whom one might find it at times decidedly inconvenient to humor; and her usual cool disdain of her elderly relative had only become more pronounced with Evelyn's advent into the family, and Mrs. Madison's immediate liking for Alfred's wife.

Nevertheless, on this particular day she, too, had seen fit during the early morning hours to make a short call, and she had come in with such a look of triumphant satisfaction, such an air of prosperity generally, that old Mrs. Madison, always ready to assign a sentimental explanation for such a demonstration, and recalling a recent rumor in relation to the attentions of Geoffrey Baylor, had immediately begun to suspect matrimonial prospects.

She would have liked nothing better than to talk the matter over with Evelyn, whom all day she had been expecting, and as the clock struck five she laid aside her book, the love story of which had all at once taken on a very inferior importance in her eyes in comparison with the far more vital and interesting one which her persistent thought had suggested, and slowly rose from her great chair by the fire. As she moved in the direction of the window she paused an instant by the table in one corner of the room on which reposed a mammoth fruit cake beside a great bowl of eggnog with its array of glasses.

"All ready for her, and waiting—and yet she does not come!" she exclaimed to herself, with impatience born of disappointment. "I daresay she has never tasted better in her life, although the old Tylers were famous high-livers in their day." Presently she heaved a sigh. "Well," she added as she turned away, "if she doesn't want to see me, and cares nothing for my eggnog and my fruit cake, she never saw a handsomer bowl, I'll be bound."

The bowl, with its glasses, having been accompaniments

of the great dinner service of Bohemian glass which had descended to her from an ancestor of world-wide distinction, had come through the years to possess a dignity in her eyes not to be lightly denied, and she was prone to demand for it a respect only a little short of what she would have expected, had he been present in the flesh, to be shown to the original owner himself. It was never brought out except at the Christmas season—all ordinary occasions being deemed unworthy of it—when for ten days or more it occupied a place of honor in her quaint drawing-room, having been previously filled with a certain famous drink in the making of which her forbears particularly excelled and she herself had been proved to be by no means incompetent. No crusade in the interest of temperance in her state, however urgent, had ever been able to prevent its appearance; and her merry irresponsibility of temperament positively forbade that she should disturb herself with any of the many vital questions of the hour in which her beloved Kentucky should happen to be concerned—particularly at the Christmas time.

Just as she reached the window and pulled back its curtains of old damask and lace, an electric brougham drove up. For an instant she was uncertain, not being able to recognize the vehicle in the confusion of thickly flying snowflakes. Then all at once her face brightened into a radiant smile, and she beckoned gayly. Evelyn had turned the latch of the door and was in the act of descending—a much befurred Evelyn in a long cloak and a close little hat on which the snow lingered and glistened like jewels, beneath the lights of her brougham.

As noiseless as the approach of a phantom coach the car had made its way up the winding road beneath ghostly trees bending in their white shrouds. Then its occupant

had emerged and stood for a moment, lonely and still, by the curbing. There was that in the appearance of the tall, dark-robed figure strangely in keeping with the suggestion of mystery and illusion—something remote and indefinable in the wild beauty of the upturned face, something eerie-like and hauntingly sad in the faint smile that curled the full but delicate lips. However, by the time Evelyn had entered the room, having been ushered in with considerable pomp by the old negro butler, Mrs. Madison, with characteristic buoyancy, had shaken herself free of the weird thought which had held even her unimaginative brain for an instant under its spell.

She came forward with the most gracious air of welcome. But midway across the room she paused. "My dear, what on earth have you been doing? I wonder if you know how frightfully ill and tired you look?" she exclaimed, staring. She turned abruptly and wheeled a large chair quite in front of the fire. "Are you so cold? Your lips are positively blue," she added, anxiously.

Evelyn shook her head. She stood a moment with her hand on the back of the chair as if steadying herself. For an instant her face was downcast, then she slowly raised her eyes and met the gaze of the elder woman with a look that threw a sudden illumination over her features and gave to them the transformation which comes through some marvelous inward victory—a spiritual thing of profoundly spiritual import.

But Mrs. Madison, seeing only the blight upon beauty, and regretting it as one does the sight of frost upon a flower, was gravely troubled in her worldly, warmly sympathetic old heart.

"You are looking downright ill," she said. "One can see that you have not had a good night's rest in weeks or even months."

"But I am quite used to that," responded Evelyn, cheerfully, as she took the proffered seat.

Old Mrs. Madison moved across the room and seated herself comfortably in her great chair by the fire, and with the stateliness of one ascending a throne.

"It oughtn't to be allowed," she announced, formally and finally. "It will surely rob you of your good looks, and if there is any place in this world worth having for an ugly woman I am sure I don't know where it is."

Evelyn smiled again, this time with a sudden gleam of humor showing in her wan countenance as she began to loosen her heavy fur cloak.

"Don't let me frighten you, dear Mrs. Madison," she said. "I am not at all ill. I am a little cold, I think—and tired. Alfred is to have a tree to-morrow—a most dazzlingly beautiful one, with everything pretty I could find to put on it—and I have been standing around in the shops for hours, because I was compelled to put it off until the last minute almost. He is as happy as a little child at the prospect."

She leaned toward the great fire and spread out her hands, and under the enforced gayety of her manner Mrs. Madison was slightly ensnared. Nevertheless, she returned to the subject.

"One misses your fine color, my dear," she remarked gently, and with her usual studied elegance. "You labor under a disadvantage that I also experienced in my youth. Like yours, my complexion was of the brilliant, florid kind, and if by any chance I was looking pale my friends were instantly alarmed about me. Mr. Madison always said that what first attracted him to me was my radiant bloom. But then, a great many others said precisely the same thing," supplemented the old lady, with a coy, coquettish glance, and a soft sighing for her vanished youth.

"I am sure you must have been quite wonderful," suggested Evelyn, well aware that she was starting a favorite theme, and turning a face of genuine liking toward the impressive, complacent figure opposite.

Mrs. Madison sighed again. "No more wonderful than you, dearie," she confessed, generously, "although your face is at times far sadder than at your age a face ought to be; and recently I have feared that you were getting into actual ill-health. You are under too great a strain. Alfred, poor boy, must not be allowed to grow selfish. It is the natural tendency of man, and his condition has doubtless made him more exacting. He should realize that a beautiful young thing like you should not be caged. I have always said that extraordinary good looks puts a woman under a special obligation. She should allow her beauty to be seen. Mr. Madison was early made to recognize that. And though he was an invalid all his days, I went constantly into society and continued through a long period of years to be admired quite as much as when I was free and unmarried."

"But I care nothing for anything at all like that," said Evelyn, slowly and decisively.

Old Mrs. Madison turned her head several times from side to side. Then she laughed slyly.

"You are wrong, my dear, you are surely wrong, and you should allow that high-and-mighty person, my Lady Caroline, to help lift your burden occasionally—at least, as long as she is with you. Provided her present intentions are not thwarted that will not be, I think, for a very great while. It is evident that she is setting her cap for young Baylor, who, since Colonel Douglas has made him his heir, is thought to be the greatest catch about here."

Evelyn put out a protesting hand.

"Please—dear Mrs. Madison—" she was beginning, but the old lady completely ignored the interruption.

"Caroline usually accomplishes what she sets her head to, and young Baylor, I hear, is quite attentive. However, Maria Douglas, who was here for a while this morning, tells me that Colonel Douglas has not been informed of the engagement—if there is actually an engagement. Of course there is no use trying to find out anything from you. She'd never think of taking you into her counsels. But I think I see through her plan. She hopes gradually to win the old colonel over, who, by the way, holds her in particular aversion, it is said. Hoity-toity, what won't her impudence undertake!"

Evelyn still was silent, and presently the old lady lifted her lace handkerchief and chuckled softly behind it.

"It is a case of Greek meet Greek, but he's more than a match for her, and the game is not by any means won yet—mark my word."

"You once knew the colonel very well, didn't you?" asked Evelyn, gravely, with her eyes on the fire.

"I was engaged to him," replied Mrs. Madison, quite simply and naturally, "at the time I married Mr. Madison. Colonel Douglas never forgave me, but as a matter of fact he fared no worse than some half a dozen others. My father was then in the United States Senate, and I was married in Washington at the close of a very brilliant season, so that I really had no time to explain to all my Kentucky lovers why I had changed my mind and Mr. Madison was the man of my choice. However, I sent them all cards addressed in my own handwriting. The others behaved very well, but the colonel's conduct was most trying. It is still, since he has never, except upon one occasion, deigned to recognize me, and that experience is not one I care to recall,"

She rose and moved toward the bowl of eggnog. "By the way," she said, over her shoulder, "I can't help thinking that if you had been Geoffrey's choice the old colonel, in spite of his dislike of marriage, would have offered no opposition. You are the one woman, Maria Deuglas tells me, of whom he has ever been known to speak kindly."

Evelyn turned her head. "Don't give me any eggnog, dear Mrs. Madison," she said. "I must decline it—even when offered me out of such a gorgeous bowl. Sometime I wish you would tell me its history, but now I fear I must be leaving."

Mrs. Madison waved her to her seat. "Wait," she said, "I have a little gift upstairs for you and Alfred—nothing half so pretty as what you sent me, as I have tried to tell you in the note which accompanies it—and you must let me go and fetch it." She rummaged among the magazines and periodicals on the table. "There is something here that will interest you, I think—an article on young Baylor and his art. You might glance over it in my absence."

With a strange look in her eyes, a look of startled, piercing inquiry, and filled with the dumb agony of unspeakable dread, Evelyn received the proffered journal. Mrs. Madison's face, however, was wholly unrevealing. She paused an instant to turn a trifle higher the shaded lamp on the table, and then bustled cheerily from the room, leaving it flooded in the nearby spaces with a warm, rosy glow suggestive of her own picturesque and comfortable presence.

For an instant after she was left alone Evelyn remained standing in the center of the hearth rug, the fire-light playing upon the slender, motionless form and bringing it into high relief in contrast with the shadows lurk-

ing in the far corners of the great room. She had grown very white, and the hands which held the literary journal trembled a little and were icy cold. A sense of something imminent and crushing, as the onward sweep of an avalanche, compelled her to an involuntary, momentary shrinking that was purely instinctive. But she speedily regained her self-control. She moved quickly forward and knelt down in the firelight, avoiding deliberately the lamp on the table as a matter of self-protection in case of Mrs. Madison's prompt return. Then she opened the magazine and began feverishly turning the pages.

At first sight of the name signed to the article she caught in her breath, and once more a sense of awful poignant foreboding, bewildering, blinding, made her suddenly draw back as to escape an actual physical blow. This was no ordinary person who had taken upon himself the task of pronouncing judgment upon the work of one in whom by general consensus of opinion it was believed that the divine fire burned. The reviewer, himself an author of note, and a man distinguished in the nation for his rare scholarship and his equally rare sincerity of soul, was one of whom it was impossible to doubt either his earnestness of purpose or his ability correctly to estimate in relation to the work before him. She could but feel that for many at least he would speak the final word.

There were a few reserved, respectful paragraphs relating to the author of the drama—paragraphs that seemed to fit themselves with a peculiar nicety to the highbred remoteness of the poet—and also a gracious word of welcome and of congratulation relating to the appearance of this, his latest poetic expression. Then the critic seemed to pause, and to breathe a sigh of regret before plunging into the solemn, dirge-like commentary which immediately followed,

In the midst of much that was purely technical and to the ordinary reader obscure, one thing stood out that he who ran might have readily discerned: the verdict of failure—a failure, however, in the opinion of the reviewer, that was to be laid to the charge not so much of dethronement as of abdication; and in the gravely careful words, glowing with a great sadness, one could never question that the supreme motive was not to wound but to inspire, not to quench but to rekindle. So that, in thus proclaiming to the world this evidence of deterioration in one whose lips had once seemed touched with a coal from off the very altar of Truth, there was given due tribute to the genius of the man whose whole being had formerly flamed with the fire of most exalted feeling, and whose torch, still held manfully aloft, had, it was averred, but temporarily gone out.

Thus the reader was left not without hope. One day, in all confidence it was declared, the admirers of Geoffrey Baylor, who had predicted great things for the author of some of the most exquisite bits of verse in the whole of English literature, would see their prophecy fulfilled. In the meantime the young poet, struggling up out of the pessimism and the lack of faith which to the thoughtful the present volume indicated despite its manifest skill, its marvelous delicacy and beauty of phrase, its flawless metrical form, must grow into a nobler and broader attitude toward life. The change must be in himself, and it must be reconstructive. Possibly this would come through a very simple process of healing: a closer contact with nature and a profounder study of those great eternal principles of life that are man's first lessons with respect to the fundamental mysteries; or it might come through ordinary human love—a love that would be powerful enough and galvanic enough to rouse him to a new won-

derment and awe, and so rebuild in him not only the "music" but the "dream."

Otherwise, the writer was without hesitation in affirming there could be but one end—one more instance of that saddest of all earthly spectacles, a spirit, designed for lofty flights, in deliberate defiance and revolt, consumed by its own bitterness, conquered and finally beaten down to earth, because it had dared to defy Omnipotence Himself, and refused to be under subjection to Him.

Evelyn read the article throughout. But in the awful white heat of emotion which possessed her she felt that she was but rereading what she had long been familiar with, and what could, therefore, to her offer no surprise. Yet it was confirmation—a confirmation that marked and sealed her own complicity.

In that moment she felt herself to be as much a murderer as if the very brand of Cain had been placed on her brow. And in the depth and agony of her repentance, in the utter and final crucifixion of self, she reached to heights of divine conception in which there was afforded her a glimpse of the very power and majesty of God; while in her new relation to the Infinite her spirit rose up and fought desperately—fought valiantly against the forces of darkness which were dragging him down, and called upon Heaven for aid. Prayer, "that mighty engine of achievement," faith, the dynamic power of concentrated thought—what might they not effect in the accomplishment of the miracle of spiritual healing in the universe in which we live, where their mysterious influence in human affairs is still but dimly beginning to be understood? The sense of something vast and transcendent, something that laid hold of her imperfect strength and linked it with the Supreme Strength, brought a look of exultation to her features. She rose,

A moment afterward there was a step in the hall and Mrs. Madison came briskly in, a trifle flushed and apologetic.

Still with a dazed, rapt look in her eyes, Evelyn came forward. She glanced down at the journal in her hand.

"Will you give me this?" she asked, abruptly.

Mrs. Madison paused and stared, struck by the white, strange look of her guest.

"Oh, that," she replied, carelessly and slightly reassured. "Of course you may have it, my dear." She moved toward the table and began turning over the various magazines with which it was strewn. "I take all of them, you see, but as a matter of fact, they seldom interest me. What I really enjoy is a good novel, filled with well-bred people, and hot with love and kisses. Is there anything else here you would care for?"

"Thank you, nothing else. And now I must say good-by."

Once more Mrs. Madison studied the white face before her a little anxiously, but she only said, "I am sorry that I had to remain away so long—the servants had misplaced my little gift, as I suspected, and I had to make a thorough search for it. I have now sent it out to the car, and you two must on no account take a peep at it until to-morrow morning."

"How good—how good you are to us!" murmured Evelyn, as she moved toward the door.

The old lady walked beside the tall figure in thoughtful quiet. But on the threshold she suddenly paused, and smiled.

"My dear," she said, "I am a very old woman, and the experience of years may not be without its value. I should like to give you a parting word. It is this: Keep a merry heart, live without fear, make the most of

the pleasant things of this pleasant world, and never forget that whatever fault we may have to find with it, it is, after all, the only world we happen to know anything about." And having delivered herself of this characteristic and thoroughly pagan philosophy, a philosophy that, be it said, she had strictly lived up to in her own life, she drew nearer and imprinted a warm, motherly kiss upon the lips of the beautiful, silent woman at her side.

Then the great hall door opened and closed, and a moment afterward Evelyn in her electric was being borne noiselessly over the new-fallen snow into that realm of exalted spiritual existence, made possible for her through prayer and mystical communion, which already she had entered upon—an existence that forever afterward was to be glorified by the power of the Vision and made beautiful by the light of a divine and purely unselfish hope.

CHAPTER II

COLONEL DOUGLAS TAKES A HAND

ON the same afternoon Maria Douglas, who, somewhat reluctantly, owing to a recognition of certain painful complications involved, had consented to take upon herself a general responsibility in relation to a dinner that Geoffrey had arranged for that evening, found herself decidedly in a dilemma. Considerably to her surprise and to her discomfiture, likewise, when she returned shortly after midday with the thought of superintending the decorations and appointments of the table, the discovery had been made that Colonel Douglas was still unaware of the fact that Mrs. Delafield was to be among the guests he was expected to receive. With the knowledge, gained as it happened by the merest accident, her usual bubbling overflow of youthful spirits suffered such rebuff that for a full fifteen minutes she sat like one stunned, wholly unable to collect her faculties for any sort of action and with a look of comical dismay depicted upon her features.

It had been obviously impossible to discuss the subject freely with Geoffrey. That he was to a large extent ignorant of his uncle's deep and implacable dislike of Mrs. Delafield she well knew, Geoffrey's proud dignity and Caroline's far-sighted calculation having hitherto averted the catastrophe which, to the mind of the young girl, was inevitable as soon as the actual truth of the situation

should be laid bare. The plan of the Christmas Eve dinner, therefore, at which Caroline in all her splendor of beauty and wit was to make as it were a fresh start in the way of propitiation and favor, seemed to her, in view of some of the colonel's recent anathemas, a blunder that would doubtless lead not only to a crisis but a scene. The old colonel's wrath, long bottled, save for an occasional outbreak in the presence of herself, whom he still clung to as a forlorn hope of rescue, would surely suffer an explosion if he were asked to rise to anything so difficult as an extended evening at table with the being whom, through constant brooding, he had grown to look upon as the arch-destroyer of his peace. Disaster without a peradventure must inevitably follow to those who would thus "on the gods presume," and Maria was simply at her wit's end to know what one should do in a strait so desperate.

She was, however, a young woman not without resources, and when presently there came a sound of familiar footsteps and the shadow of a tall, dark figure stalking past the open door of the dining-room, she looked up from the huge basket of holly over which she was bending and called out gayly:

"Won't you come in here for a moment, Cousin Marshall? I want you to behold the success of my handiwork."

There was no answer. But at the sound of the fresh young voice Colonel Douglas paused in the abrupt, eccentric fashion peculiar to him and remained for an instant stockstill on the threshold, peering through his gold-rimmed spectacles at the slender figure in the long white apron, and surveying the great room, decked and almost ready for the evening celebration, with a look upon his knotty old features that was a curious commingling of

his usual grim, sardonic humor and a half-whimsical satisfaction.

With an air of cool unconcern the girl dropped her holly and came forward examining one hand a trifle critically. "Ugh, how tough that last piece was!" she exclaimed, with a laugh. "I couldn't tear it, and I couldn't bite it, and I couldn't cut it, so I ended by nearly chopping off my poor finger instead."

The colonel regarded her with interest. Then he slowly nodded his head several times and grinned appreciatively.

"It is the natural result," he said, dryly, with his eyes upon the great white table glittering with its beautiful appointments and Christmas adornment, "it is the natural result when ignorance or impudence attempts to pit itself against the monstrous law of life."

Maria Douglas broke into a laugh that was thoroughly spontaneous yet tinctured with a faint caution. She darted a furtive glance out of the corner of her eye at the old man and said quickly, "So there is a moral! Well, perhaps the happiest way out would be never to attempt what is beyond one's powers. It is a wise child that recognizes its own limitations. I must have been born with a realization of mine, and it really has saved me no end of bother. For instance, I have always known that it was not remotely possible that I should ever attain any sort of artistic distinction or be the heroine of a great romantic love. Now when it comes to holly—"

She caught herself up suddenly, with an airy shrug of the shoulders and a rueful glance in the direction of the colonel, who plainly was growing restive, just as she evidently was simply talking to gain time.

"Now when it comes to holly," she repeated, "and other practical matters of the ordinary kind, I am usually the victor."

The colonel turned on his heel.

"Don't go, Cousin Marshall," she pleaded, growing suddenly frantic. "Please wait a minute. I want you—I want you to tell me what you think of my table. Isn't that a darling little Christmas tree in the center? Please like it. I want everybody to like it. This must be—this must be as happy an evening for Geoffrey as we can possibly make it. I fear he can't help being a little upset, poor dear! Those unmannerly critics! I only wish they would leave him alone—anyway, until after Christmas."

The colonel's eyes flashed and his dark face grew black. He suddenly set his teeth and snarled.

"Do you recall Schopenhauer's words in relation to envy?" he asked, turning upon the girl with a ferocity that one less accustomed to his ways and less instinctively valiant might have found decidedly disconcerting. "He says, 'To personal advantages it is most irreconcilable; hence understanding and even genius have at first to beg forgiveness of the world, whenever they are not in a position to despise the world.'"

Maria Douglas's glance rested thoughtfully upon the table.

"Oh, but the majority of persons mean to be kind, I think—even the critics," she replied, at length, with her eyes fixed on a somewhat perilously poised Santa Claus on the topmost bough of the miniature tree.

"Kind!" roared the colonel in extreme disgust. "Then if you hold such sentiment you are even a greater idiot than I took you for. Listen to this, and remember it, and profit by it: 'Man yields in cruelty and pitilessness to no tiger and no hyena.'"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Maria Douglas, wholly unabashed.

"And this," continued the colonel, with his falcon eye turned reluctantly upon her: "'Man is at bottom a wild, horrible creature. We know him merely as broken in and tamed by what we call civilization, and hence the occasional outbreaks of his nature shock us. But when and where the padlock and chain of legal order fall off and anarchy enters, then he shows himself what he is.' Ah, that was a master mind that formulated that thought—a master mind! None other than Schopenhauer himself could have expressed it with equal felicity. But I am wasting time here with a young ninny like you." Then he added, by no means unkindly, and with a slight twinkle in his piercing dark eyes as they rested on the girl's face a trifle curiously, "'Against stupidity the very gods themselves contend in vain.'"

"'God be merciful to me, a fool,'" quoted Maria, unperturbed.

He wheeled, thought better of it, and turned again and faced her.

"So you have settled it, humph, that you are not to be the héroïne of a great romantic love?"

She nodded cheerfully.

"Oh, a long time ago, Cousin Marshall. Isn't it quite too bad? Otherwise—who knows?—you might have had me for a niece as well as a cousin." She heaved an exaggerated sigh and then laughed softly, at the same time bestowing upon him a decidedly wary glance from under her half-closed eyelids. "As it is—" she carefully adjusted a tall silver candelabrum on the table and stood off to examine the effect critically, her whole soul apparently absorbed in the process in cool denial of the fact that she was quaking inwardly—"as it is, you are destined to have some one else instead—some one far cleverer—and—and as beautiful as a poet's dream."

She had boldly taken the plunge, but she dared not turn her head to look at him.

A blank, absolute silence followed upon her words.

Presently the colonel spoke abruptly. "What is the meaning of this reference?" he said, a sudden hoarseness sounding in his voice. "Explain yourself—explain fully."

Despite the haughty defiance of his tone and his evident kindling anger, she still managed to keep an outward calmness.

"I really haven't anything to explain," replied Maria, with her eyes on the table. "By the way, won't you take a look at these place cards? I painted them myself—so you see I am not wholly deficient, even if I am a fool." She gathered up the cards in front of her, and all at once began to speak quickly and breathlessly. "This is yours—Mrs. Dalafield is on your right—you see you are to take her in, of course—"

She suddenly caught herself up, completely frightened at last and startled by the dark face suddenly thrust close to her own. It was livid with rage. The colonel grasped her arm fiercely.

"Take her in!" he shouted—"take her in! *How dare* you? Have you got rid of your senses—the very limited portion allotted to you? What have I to do with a designing female of her order—a brazen-faced, two-faced, dare-devil of a widow, who has been laying her trap for that poor boy to ensnare him since the first moment she attained her freedom—and God Almighty only knows how long before. Hell and damnation! but you *are* a fool, sure enough! What has got into you to plan a mare's nest like that? Do you expect me meekly to sit by and let him put his head in the lion's mouth? Worse still, to be a partner to his folly? Do you think—"

All at once Maria Douglas pulled herself together. Howbeit, it was not without effort. She faced the irate colonel squarely.

"Do you care to know what I think? Then let me tell you. I think there is no—absolutely—no help for it, Cousin Marshall."

"What—what has he told you?" hissed the colonel, close at her ear.

"Geoffrey has not told me anything, and perhaps I am not privileged to volunteer an opinion in his affairs. Only I do mean it for the best, and I am confident that he is going to marry Mrs. Delafield. You can do nothing to prevent it."

The old colonel's face worked convulsively. For full a minute he stood staring at her without speaking. But he was thinking—thinking hard; and something in the unmistakable sincerity and conviction of the girl's words, abetted by a secret respect that he held for her cool, level-headed assurance, notwithstanding his repeated unflattering epithet, brought him to a sharp realization of the importance of immediate action.

"Please—please try to believe that you can do nothing to prevent it," pleaded Maria, growing desperate.

The colonel straightened himself with soldierly aspect.

"By Heaven, I *will* prevent it," he burst forth, at last. "Order my carriage!" he commanded, in a voice of thunder to the servant who had just entered the room. He pointed one long, lean forefinger in the face of the astonished domestic who disappeared precipitately, and then once more he fixed his gaze upon Maria. "Where there is a will," he added, slowly and sententiously, a peculiar emphasis marking every word of the deliberate utterance, "where there is a *will*, there is usually a way. And before many more days have passed that person shall

know that in this case there is both a will—and a way.”

With that he turned and marched majestically from the room, only to find himself intercepted, however, by Maria, who flung herself despairingly upon him.

“Oh, but you won’t, you won’t make a scene!” she implored, almost tearful under a sense of the evident failure of her attempt to prevent the impending cataclysm and weighed to earth by responsibility.

The colonel paused and quietly unlocked her arms from about his neck that were clutching him almost to the point of suffocation.

“No, I’ll make no scene,” he said, with a sudden return of his usual dry, ironic humor. “It will not—it will not be necessary. But see to it when I return that no one enters my room. I have an acute attack of gout—an acute attack of gout—do you understand?—and my orders must be obeyed.”

Ten minutes later he was on his way to town, his destination being the offices of a certain well known attorney, with whom for the next hour or more he remained closeted in a long and serious consultation. The result, however, was of such eminent satisfaction to himself that, when he finally made his way to his carriage, there was a light in his eye and an almost youthful spring in his walk decidedly at variance with the suffering with which a short time before he had professed to be afflicted.

CHAPTER III

THE HAZARD OF THE DIE?

"OH, you are not going out!"

Evelyn was just passing the door of the little upstairs library, and she paused at the sound of the indifferent, half-jeering surprise in Caroline's cool, clear treble proceeding from the neighborhood of the bookshelves on the far side of the apartment. Outside it was sleeting and blowing furiously, and the bleakness of the stretch of hillside seen from the library window offered a sharp contrast to the warmth and luxury of the small firelit room, with its beautifully appointed tea table and its gracefully gowned occupant.

"You are not actually going out!" Caroline repeated, bestowing a suave, but keenly questioning look upon the tall, lithe figure in the doorway.

Evelyn looked up from the heavy glove she was fastening. "Only for a little run down the road," she replied, briefly. "Alfred is taking his afternoon nap."

She was in short skirt and rain coat, and she wore a small closely fitting hat pressed down upon her bronze head as in defiance of the storm, her costume being a sort of cheerful challenge that was reflected in her whole aspect. In the subtle change which had recently taken place within herself her lost youth seemed to be coming back to her. Her face was eager, hopeful, trusting. Her eyes were shining with a strange new lustre, and there

was a curious return in all her spirited movement of a buoyancy that had long been absent.

Caroline stared, wondering. Then she fixed her eyes again on the bookshelves, selected a volume, and calmly seated herself in the large chair by the window. She laughed softly, and with delicately veiled sarcasm.

"Don't you think your progress as a successful runner will be slightly impeded by slush and wind and sleet?" she asked.

Evelyn's answer came promptly and with a good humor that was wholly unassumed.

"Doubtless, but I shan't mind it in the least."

Her face, freed from the look of strain and suffering, was to Caroline a puzzle to which she was unable to find the smallest clew. In the radiance which shone upon the beautiful brow there was a look of exalted dignity that could come only from some mysterious peace—a peace of which Caroline in her turbulent, warring existence, and in her narrowness of soul could have no knowledge. It confused and irritated her. She leaned back languidly and with a half insolent air in her great chair, putting her hands behind her head in a familiar gesture. She was in a tea gown of soft white silk with touches of green, the clinging garment of a modified Grecian style adapting itself with a peculiar fitness to her coldly classic beauty. Recently she had discarded her mourning. Taking advantage of the numerous festivities incident to the holiday time to mark her return to the social world, she had plunged with feverish abandon into the whirl of life, attempting to find in the excitement it offered a sort of safety-valve in the midst of a tremendous and well-nigh overwhelming tension. To-day she was feeling distinctly wearied and distraught, and as she studied Evelyn's

features with a thoughtful scrutiny, there came a faint pucker of annoyance between her eyes and her lips closed with a peculiar firmness.

"You don't mind?" she echoed. "Then like myself you love—you love the battle, perhaps? At least we have found one point on which our tastes agree. Nothing is more exhilarating, I think, than a contest, whether it be an encounter with the elements or with human forces that would attempt to beat one down. And when I fight, I always fight to the end. There is never any possible surrender for me until I know my doom is sealed. By the way," she added, with a glance out of the window, "did you say *down* the road, or are you going toward the town?"

"Down," responded Evelyn, turning away. "I seldom walk toward the town."

Caroline reflected, and into the still features there came a look of sinister, cold-blooded purpose.

"I was thinking—I was just thinking," she suggested, with her eyes fixed on the opposite wall, "that if you had a mind to go in another direction—to take the orchard path, in fact, I might offer you protection. Mr. Baylor is lunching with some one over across the way, and he will take the orchard path back, I am sure, as I am expecting him here at about five."

The deliberate attempt to affront, plainly evident in this flaunting of her own peculiar right to bestow, seemed to fall upon unheeding ears. Evelyn's face remained undisturbed. Her voice was entirely calm.

"I shall be back in less than half an hour," she said, ignoring everything.

It appeared quite impossible to alter that perfect repose of spirit which seemed to hold her as serenely aloof

from any assault that could attack her from without as if she were clothed in invincible armor—which, in reality, she was. Nevertheless, Caroline essayed a final fling.

"Then, later, you will come in here with us for a cup of tea, will you not?"

"Thank you, no," she responded. "Alfred will be just waking when I return, and I shall go straight to him as soon as I can convert myself into something other than a mermaid."

Caroline's shoulders went up in a shrug. Then she coolly opened her book.

"How dutiful!" she exclaimed. "However, if I were a mermaid of your order, I should wish that 'the wild white horses of the sea' would come and carry me off, I know. I must begin and take some lessons from you, else I fear that I shall never develop into the patient spouse you are—after Geoffrey has claimed me."

But Evelyn was already on the stair, and Caroline had not the satisfaction of knowing that her remark had been even heard.

She sat for some time when alone gazing steadfastly out of the window, with eyes wholly unseeing, however, the dreary expanse of landscape they rested upon. Her book still lay in her lap, but her glance never once wandered to it.

Presently there was the sound of falling coals on the hearth, but she did not give the smallest heed. Her gaze, turned inward in an absorbing introspection, was as absolutely without conscious recognition of the objects which seemed to claim her attention as if she were actually sightless, just as she was deaf to any sound save the repeated racking questioning which forced itself upon her ears.

Once more a novel sensation, persistent of late, grow-

ing out of a situation strangely anomalous, held her in its grasp, and, profoundly disquieted thereby, her imperious, coldly calculating nature again suffered the rebuff which comes to the arrogant when thwarted.

During the brief period of her engagement to Geoffrey, a period of such peculiar storm and stress as to outweigh the emotion of her entire previous existence, a feeling, at first too vague to be definitely defined, had been slowly growing up within herself, until it had finally taken on a distinct quality—a quality so baldly real and so closely resembling mistrust of her own powers that she had at last drawn back in horror and amaze in the presence of an acknowledgment as painful as it was unaccustomed.

Hitherto, in every emergency her magnificent will and courage, fostered by vanity, had been all-sufficient, and she had marched with head erect and the serene smile of the successful straight on to victory. But, notwithstanding the fact that she kept up a brave show before the world, so that even old Mrs. Madison's shrewd eyes were by it deceived, the triumph which had seemingly been hers in relation to Geoffrey, and which had at first filled her with proud elation as representing the very crowning of the years, had been early recognized by herself as a doubtful one, likely at any time to lose its fair proportions, and to assume an aspect too humiliating to be regarded patiently.

Perhaps the best evidence of this secret, gnawing fear was the temporizing spirit which she had manifested from the outset. Hoping that through delay not only her hold upon Geoffrey should be strengthened, but also that Colonel Douglas to some extent should be appeased, she had up to the present moment steadfastly avoided all serious discussion of a definite time of marriage.

But there had come to her an entirely altered state of

mind since the evening of Geoffrey's dinner—when he had seemed particularly enigmatical, at times plunged in gloom, and again giving way to a sort of wild, reckless abandonment of mirth in which she detected a hollow ring. Conviction was taking root in her, and she had since then been coolly contemplating the hazard of the die.

It was, therefore, due to no sudden impulse that she had begun calmly to consider the advisability of the test from which previously she had shrunk. The uncertainty which harassed her continually whenever she thought of Evelyn in relation to Geoffrey; the conviction that Evelyn had married Alfred while still loving Geoffrey; and, above all, the suspicion that her own power over the latter had been thwarted through some feeling, still unconquered, that possibly he had for Evelyn, had become almost too galling to be borne. With that love of domination which, coupled with a great daring, was the essence of her whole being, she refused positively to accept herself as other than the supreme, compelling force in his life. That assuredly she must be, or nothing; and the bare thought that she was perhaps a mere companion to that mental side of him which recently to some extent she had succeeded in arousing and stimulating was a condition against which her pride fought hard and bitterly, howbeit it was not love on a large scale that she hungered for so much as power.

Despite the bruise to her feminine nature, which, with the full intensity of her womanhood she instinctively resented, the deeper wound by far was to those tremendous forces within herself which up to this time had failed, but which, nevertheless, rendered her not unmindful of the fact that there was a power, distinctly spiritual, and wholly without her sphere, that yet might hold him with

hooks of steel and with a persistence against which all her strength could not prevail.

Once more the coals behind the brass andirons sank noisily, and this time her absorption was broken upon. She glanced at the clock. It lacked twenty minutes of five. She rose and stood surveying herself critically in the old-fashioned mirror over the mantel, the passion in her fierce, prolonged inquiry being suddenly assuaged by the satisfaction she invariably felt in the examination of her own claims to beauty. Then she crossed the room to the bookshelves and mechanically returned the volume she held in her hand.

As she did this, something back of the books seemed to glide gently forward and fall softly. Indifferent, she was about to turn away when the spirit of thoroughness which characterized her housekeeping made it an act of second nature for her to linger a moment with the thought of detecting some slovenliness on the part of her servants in the way of dust or a misplaced article. She speedily removed several of the books from the shelf and searched back of them.

Nothing was revealed, however, save a small volume that, contrary to orders, had evidently been tucked carelessly away on the top of other books and in a position to fall with repeated jostling. She reached out a hand gingerly and drew it forth, more occupied with the dread of soiling her slim, daintily cared for fingers than pleased at the discovery. But as her eyes rested upon the small green and gold volume her expression changed.

The book was the lost copy of Geoffrey's "Psyche" for which she had heard Alfred make frequent and unavailing inquiry, and which formerly he had kept always on his table. For a moment she held it thoughtfully in her hand, making a swift contrast as there swept over her a realiza-

tion of the freshness and fire of this earlier work as compared with the despondent heaviness of his latest achievement. Then, about to find a less obscure place for it, her eyes chanced to rest upon the edges of a sheet of letter paper protruding from the leaves. She turned to it.

It was a closely written sheet, blotted and blurred, with here and there words hastily crossed out, and with even the suspicion of tears — a curiously intimate and suggestive bit of writing expressive of a profoundly sacred feeling, and placed here obviously by some untoward accident. But despite the evidence of excitement, caused by hurry or emotion, under which the missive had been penned, Caroline had no difficulty in recognizing the handwriting at once as Evelyn's.

She quickly crossed the room, holding in one hand the volume and in the other the portion of the letter she had discovered. She placed the volume on the table near the chair she had a moment before vacated, sat down, and calmly, without an instant's hesitation, began to read the letter.

With the first sentence her face paled. With the next she understood. The sheet was a thing alive and quivering in her hands—an imprisoned bird fluttering in wild despair, a human heart, naked, agonized, and throbbing piteously.

Untouched and unashamed she read, even down to the very last word, this portion of what her quick mind was able to perceive was a longer and absolutely unsparing confession of a tortured soul, driven to extreme measures, extenuating nothing, and seeking to hide only its anguish—lest the hurt to another should be too great—behind a veiled and delicately guarded symbolism. In a flash everything was made clear to her. Evelyn had written

this most astounding human document on her wedding night, preparatory to deserting the abode she had but a few hours before entered as a bride, and just after Alfred had left her, hastily summoned to the bedside of his dying father. The violent revulsion of feeling which had driven her, a woman governed by an acutely sensitive conscience, and skilled in the knowledge of conventionalities, to a step so startling could be accounted for in but one way: it must be traced to a single source, and that source could be none other than Geoffrey, the accidental and evidently unexpected sight of whom had awoke in her all the conquered passion of the past, and driven her to desperation.

Presently Caroline raised her head. Staring steadily at the opposite wall, she sat rapt in an intensity of concentrated thought, as she swiftly proceeded in her prompt unraveling. All at once she caught in her breath quickly, and slowly nodded several times. It was all entirely clear at last. Alfred's accident had altered everything. The letter intended for him on his return was, unconsciously, destroyed only in part when the shock came. In the horror and confusion following upon the knowledge of his accident, this portion, snatched up by a servant doubtless and thrust into the first volume at hand when his room was being cleared, all unknown to Evelyn had remained, later and at a very inopportune moment to come to light, when it should serve as an accusing and most humiliating witness to things hidden and inconceivably rash.

Her face had grown white and hard as adamant. There was about her the mysterious stillness of the sphinx. But out of the dark conflict of emotion which held her one feeling struggled to the surface and became paramount—a feeling of implacable hatred toward Evelyn.

The hands of the clock were moving slowly toward the hour when suddenly into the midst of her profound stillness there came the sound of footsteps on the stair. It was Penelope's swift, cat-like tread hurrying toward the library. At length a voice spoke. "Miss Ca'line, is you in dar?"

The negress had paused on the threshold and was peering anxiously into the darkening room. An instant afterward, perceiving her mistress in the large chair by the window, she hurried forward, extending a silver salver.

Without turning her head for more than a brief, impatient glance, Caroline reached forth a hand toward the salver, expecting to find a card upon it. But there was no card. Instead, there was only a large, official-looking envelope addressed to herself in a handwriting wholly unfamiliar.

"I done give hit to one o' dem low-lifted niggers long time ago," explained Penelope, in great distress, "but seem lak 'tain' nothin' dey don't fergit 'ceptin' dey victuals." Then, noting her mistress' evident unconcern, she added, meaningly, "Hit's fum over to de cun'l's."

Caroline took the huge, oblong envelope into her hands, possessed all at once of a curious sense of something inauspicious and imminent. As if events were suddenly crowding upon her with a rapidity over-taxing even to her extraordinarily steady nerve, she hesitated for an instant, startled, and acutely conscious of a menace.

"You may go," she said, presently, looking up at last from the small, crabbed, but strikingly characteristic handwriting she had been studying.

As the woman disappeared she broke the seal. A painful and unaccountable trembling had seized her, and for the moment the large, well-covered sheet was only a blur. But she quickly collected herself and spread out the paper

before her, at once stabbed and roused to a tremendous rush of feeling, as soon as she had grasped the nature of its contents.

"I, Marshall Douglas," she read, "of the county of Fayette, state of Kentucky, being of sound mind and disposing memory, and in full possession of all my mental faculties, do hereby make and publish my last will and testament, revoking any and every other will heretofore made by me."

She caught in her breath quickly, then she leaned toward the waning light, clutching the paper wildly.

With the rapidity of lightning her eyes ran down the sheet. Passing over numerous minor bequests and unimportant directions, her gaze finally riveted itself upon the following:

"After making the foregoing provisions, and after the payment of all my just debts and funeral expenses, I do hereby give, bequeath, and will to my beloved nephew, Geoffrey Baylor, the whole of the residue of my large estate, said estate to be delivered over to him upon one single condition: that he forbear to take unto himself as wife one Caroline Merriweather Delafield, to a union with whom and himself I do hereby positively refuse my sanction, such union being in the opinion of the testator a consummation most calamitous and disastrous. Should the said Geoffrey Baylor, in defiance of my expressed wishes, and in willful disregard of his own best interests, deliberately, obstinately, and unadvisedly, wed with the said Caroline Merriweather Delafield, I desire that the entire estate otherwise bequeathed to him and herein mentioned shall go to the erection and the maintenance of a home for the needy descendants of Confederate soldiers, as is hereinafter directed in a later clause of this will."

The paper fluttered to her feet. Into the hardness and

whiteness of her face there had come two dull red spots. She was quivering in every nerve and fiber under the sting of the intolerable insult which had been offered her. The sardonic humor of the eccentric old man reveling in this final stroke, and in the absolute security of his position, filled her with rage that consumed like fire, though it left her outwardly possessed of an almost preternatural calm.

For a little space she sat motionless. Then she reached down for the fallen paper, placed it within the envelope, and thrust the whole into the fire.

Just as she did this there was a ring at the doorbell, and soon she heard the sound of familiar footsteps on the stairs—a man's footsteps coming steadily in the direction of the library. All at once a strange smile overspread her features. She stood, thoughtful for an instant, then she deliberately turned and lighted the rose-shaded lamp on the table.

A moment afterward she stood face to face with Geoffrey.

CHAPTER IV

THE TURN OF THE ROAD

WHEN he entered she was still smiling, obscurely, secretly, and there was a strange glitter in the light which leaped from the cool gray eyes, as she suddenly wheeled without speaking and bent above the bed of burning coals, stirring them into a brighter blaze.

"Leander!" she cried, softly, over her shoulder, breaking into a low, musical laughter, and meeting the glance of the tall figure at her side with deliberate challenge. Then she slowly turned, restored the poker to its place, and greeted him serenely, nonchalantly, but in a manner that oddly combined the effect of intimacy and a subtle attempt to throw around herself the veil of remoteness and mystery with which she was wont to clothe herself on occasions, and which she believed to be chief factor in the fascination which woman in all ages has exercised for man.

It was a meeting on his part as unlike that of a lover as one could well imagine, for he seemed preoccupied, taciturn, and absolutely matter-of-fact. But with the skill of an artist in such matters she cunningly accepted his lack as if it were a virtue, so that, to one looking on, his absorption would have appeared only as evidence of an understanding so complete and satisfying as to lift their more ordinary intercourse beyond the stage where passion seeks to reveal itself through the medium of expression in speech or in caress.

After she had motioned him to be seated, she took the low chair opposite beside the fire and sat in simple, homely quiet, waiting for him to speak. One could never be quite sure of him, she reflected, and to-day he might be little in the mood to invest her with the mystic charm of those lovely heroines of old romance with whom in their recent studies together she had newly come in touch. In their previous relations it had seldom been a part of her tactics to attempt the distinctly personal. Her paramount aim had been to render herself indispensable. But it had been with a definite purpose in mind that she had brought before his view the immortal lovers of the Hellespont, and sought, by the picture thus invoked, to fire his thought with a gleam from that far-off, deathless devotion which has burned undimmed through the centuries. With a man of the poetic feeling of Geoffrey what might not be accomplished by a judicious use of reference and suggestion?

She watched him narrowly. But, instead of turning to her in response with eyes that dived deep into her own, and with enkindling ardor, Geoffrey's only reply was the veriest commonplace. He was standing, and he seemed wholly unconscious of the furtive observation turned upon his absent, gravely handsome face.

"Beastly sort of weather!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together, as he bent toward the leaping flames, half disdainful, however, of the cold, and giving it only the curt acknowledgment of the powerful athlete who holds himself above such minor matters as mere physical inconvenience. "One is half tempted, excluding your presence, to borrow one of Uncle Marshall's oaths."

"Do it," advised Caroline, promptly, "and don't exclude my presence. It might make you feel better. Only it would be distinctly anachronistic. His oaths, classic

as they are, would be as out of place in modern society as his coat and collar."

Geoffrey laughed aloud—a somewhat forced and mirthless outburst that seemed only to accentuate the habitual somberness which had stamped itself upon the young face, and which, for an instant expelled, returned to it almost immediately.

"Well, society cannot claim that it is often given the discomfort of a sight of either—if it happens to hold objection to his coat and his collar. As for his oaths, I usually come in for a full share of them—I and the very decrepit individual whom he still picturesquely calls his body servant."

"How about Miss Douglas? Are there none reserved for her?"

"Only a limited number. Somehow, notwithstanding that she is feminine, she has managed to please him."

Caroline smiled darkly. "I have not been so lucky," she said.

She was about to let the subject drop, but he turned toward her.

"Has there been any special evidence of his dislike?" he asked, innocently.

"He hates me, I believe," replied Caroline, with the utmost sang-froid, watching intently a particular coal of fire that had fallen on the hearth and was slowly darkening.

He spoke quickly, but with thorough frankness, smiling whimsically again.

"Oh, but that is because you don't understand. It is only your unfortunate species. His dislike is not of you, but of Woman, the Eternal Temptress, the Circe of the ancients, the Destructive Force of all times. Surely you understand—you know that?"

Caroline stared.

"Yes, I know," she said, gravely, at length. She reflected a moment. "By the way, in case—in case it should happen to be not altogether generic, but individual and personal, what, in such a contingency, would you do about it?"

"There would be nothing to do about it," he answered, readily and positively.

She threw an eager, keenly scrutinizing glance into his face.

"You mean—"

"I mean that it would be worse than useless to argue with him on such a subject."

"Then, in spite of his objection, you would proceed just as if there were no objection?"

"I should proceed just as if there were no objection. I cannot regulate my conduct with the thought of his or any other man's disapproval. I do love him dearly, though," he added, with sudden youthful shyness, "and I cannot speak lightly of the thought of hurting him."

She was silent a long time.

"Geoffrey," she said, at length, very slowly and distinctly, the peculiar exactness and carefulness of her speech being particularly in evidence, "you have asked me to be your wife. You have done this, perhaps, without full knowledge of Colonel Douglas's deep-rooted dislike of me—a dislike that I can assure you is a very real thing. If you marry me, it will mean an everlasting break between you and him, and a loss of the estate which, otherwise, he would gladly leave to you. With this knowledge—do you still—do you still wish me to be your wife?"

He turned and looked her in the eyes. His face had grown white and still.

"When I asked you to be my wife," he answered, with

a distinctness that equaled her own, "it was without thought of anything that might come to me through him. I expected, by my own exertions, to be able to provide what was necessary, and I still, in spite of everything, expect to do that—in one way or another."

Caroline quickly dropped her eyes. The simplicity and utter impracticability of the plan he proposed made it difficult for her, in her somewhat overwrought state of mind, to refrain from breaking forth into wild, derisive laughter.

"In one way or another?" she repeated. "If not as a successful poet and dramatist, then as a driver of a dump-cart, or as a street-cleaner, perhaps, you will support me in elegant leisure, will you?"

His voice when he spoke at last was controlled despite the sting her words gave him.

"We may have to descend—or ascend—to the dump-cart. I draw the line on street-cleaning. In the meantime I shall try another venture in the way of literary work."

It was the first reference to his art since the appearance of his latest volume. His silence upon the subject so vital and paramount was, she knew, only his recognition that the work, in spite of a conflicting verdict and a considerable sale, had failed. That it cost him a hard effort to speak of anything so sacred to himself in the tone he was compelled to take with her was apparent in the look of profound suffering which suddenly crossed his features.

However, it was a subject that she had no intention at the present moment of following up. The courage and dignity he had shown in the midst of a crushing defeat had, it is true, revealed to her the latent power of the man in a manner that was an indirect tribute to her

own keenness of comprehension. The Geoffrey her tact and helpfulness had nursed back into hope and purpose and a realization of all the splendid possibilities of achievement that the richly endowed by nature may strive for, had, in fact, rewarded her well by a dogged determination to wrest from life the glittering crown of success which she had held constantly up before him. But the self-obliteration which had been necessary in the process of re-awakening had been by no means to her liking. She was fatigued—wearied beyond expression—by the attitude she had been compelled to assume, and she approached her crucial moment at last with a kind of malevolent delight.

She stirred slightly in her chair, made a movement as if to rise, and then thought better of it. She sat thinking a moment intently, as if formulating the exact language in which to express her thought.

"Then you do not ask me for your release?" she said, abruptly, at length.

Again he looked at her, startled, wondering.

"Do you desire to be released?" His words came slowly and with evident effort.

She leaned back in her chair and laughed softly, derisively, with an odd little gurgle in her voice that resounded through the room.

"Is this my lover I see before me?" she inquired, coolly, looking him steadily in the eyes.

For an instant he seemed to quail. He hesitated before replying, and all at once looked away, in an embarrassment that was positively boyish, toward the window.

"A man is scarcely in the mood for sentiment after plowing through all that slush and sleet," he said, quickly.

She was still smiling, quietly, secretly.

"I wonder if Leander ever said anything like that to

Hero after swimming the Hellespont?" she suggested, presently.

He ignored. "I really had meant to offer you an apology for appearing in such plight," he said, suddenly glancing down at his mud-besplattered boots. "The truth is, I was hurrying home, meaning to repair some of the ravages you see, when I passed the gardener's cottage and heard about the poor little child—that pretty one, with the big brown eyes. Some one was needed to telephone, so I came on at once in here. Mrs.—Merriweather requested it," he added, briefly, his face darkening.

She started.

"Evelyn? What on earth was she doing there?"

"The child had just died, and she was offering her assistance," he answered, abruptly.

The picture of Evelyn, kneeling beside a little still form, her face glorified with its look of divine love and pity, came before him anew, and he set his teeth hard. All at once he rose and walked over to the window.

Presently the cold tinkle of Caroline's voice came to him like the sound of a discordant piccolo in the midst of a great symphony.

"Oh, it died, did it? Well, death in the circumstances must be regarded as a mercy. There are far too many of such in the world. Those poor ignorant creatures have still half a dozen left. There ought to be a law against the propagating of the species among incompetents of that order. Evelyn is a sentimentalist, and I am not sure that she isn't also a Socialist, so, she holds, of course, an entirely different view."

Once more the grief-stricken parents and the beautiful sorrowing woman in their midst, giving of herself in all unconsciousness and without stint, came before his

mind's eye and dazzled him. It was impossible to persuade himself that the Evelyn of the past and of the present were not one and the same, save that even a larger womanhood than that he had attributed to her of the Vision seemed to dwell in that exquisite kneeling form! He recalled the look in her eyes when, not perceiving his entrance, she turned suddenly and beheld him at her side. The swift leap of her whole being to him in simple trustfulness, her thorough reliance upon him to do promptly what was needed, pierced him now, as it did then, like a sword thrust. For an instant the blackness of darkness which had descended upon him with that later revelation of herself was lifted, and again she was enthroned.

Suddenly he caught himself up with a start.

"She didn't seem actuated by any particular view," he said, stiffly, "only by a desire to be kind."

Caroline sat gazing thoughtfully into the embers. His back was toward her, and he was still standing, looking out of the window, yet with eyes that saw little of the whitening stretch of hillside. The sleet had gradually turned to snow, and the wind had subsided. All at once she rose, shivering a little.

She moved swiftly across the room and picked up the volume of "Psyche." Her face, calm, inscrutable, but of a marble whiteness, was quite near his own as he turned to find her at his elbow.

"This has just come to light," she said. "It has been lost behind the books there. I didn't tell you, did I, that Alfred has frequently commanded us to restore it to him, and that we could not, because no one seemed to know at all where it was? Let me show you a quite extraordinary bit of writing I found between the leaves. Some one, the forgotten person to whom he loaned it, probably, must have copied it out as a fragment from one of the

famous old letters of the world. It is quite classic. I don't recall the author, however. Possibly you will."

Carelessly she handed it to him, and mechanically he received it, the tremendous issue at stake between them being thus, deliberately on her part, and on his with all ignorance, reduced to the plane of the merest triviality. But despite her seeming nonchalance, the hard brilliancy of the look she bent upon him, furtive, piercing, and imperious in its exaction, might have suggested to his mind, had he not been wholly unsuspecting, the glittering cruelty of an offended goddess moved to wrath yet concealing her ire behind a countenance smiling, yet destructive.

Turning away from the window, he waited with automatic courtesy until she was again seated. An instant afterward, with a manner still somewhat absent and abrupt, he moved with short, quick strides across the narrow space and drew up a chair beside the table. Holding the sheet where the rays from the lamp should fall upon it, he surveyed it with a half-bored, indifferent interest, the look of sullen sarcasm on the handsome face marking a fleeting likeness to the old colonel and increasing her resentment.

The handwriting, imperfect, desperate, did not immediately recall to him, as it had done to Caroline, Evelyn's gracefully restrained chirography. For an instant he studied it without change of expression. Then all at once the thing happened!

Caroline, leaning toward him with her eyes riveted upon his features, saw his hand tremble and his face blanch. Suddenly she sank back in her low chair beside the fire. She was breathing quickly, and there had come a savage gleam into her eyes that she had now no need to hide, for she well knew that in that moment he was as alone and isolated as if solitary in a desert.

The man's agony was something terrible to witness. Yet she did not forbear to look upon it. Sparing neither him nor herself, she sat regarding him fixedly, her eyelids narrowed, her hands clenched. With the first violent shock of recognition, his whole being startled, stupefied beyond any thought of the moral right to read, had stood for an instant petrified, and then had seemed to move with a mad leap toward the full contents of that letter, seizing it, falling upon it, and devouring it, while, by a process of absorption rather than of sight, he grasped its meaning through the medium of ravenous, bloodshot eyes. And as he read, the profound, elemental passion of a nature distinctly direct, primeval in its simplicity and in its strength, shook and tore and uprooted him, until he lay at last felled and prostrate, quivering in every nerve, and to the uttermost degree stricken, yet with something colossal in his weakness and in his suffering through the vastness of his tremendous power to feel.

The letter dropped from his hands. His head sank upon his breast. But otherwise he was absolutely motionless; and he was as unconscious of her presence as if an ocean lay between them.

The light from the lamp shone full upon a face scarred and lined and changed almost past recognition, but the cruel watchful eyes never in shame relaxed their scrutiny until assurance was complete and a plan of action down to the minutest detail was clearly formed. All at once Caroline rose and walked over to the mantel.

"Geoffrey," she said, in a voice strangely calm, "I have something to say to you."

He started, apprehending her for the first time in the midst of his tremendous tension, and pulled himself together with an effort. Then he stood up. The two faced each other for a moment in silence,

"You have something to say to me?" he asked, presently, dazed and scarcely able to collect himself, his eyes holding the peculiar stare of one who attempts to discern an object seen dimly a long way off.

She laughed, and the sound of that low tinkle in his ears brought him to an immediate consciousness as no speech could have done. She saw the shiver which suddenly swept over him, and laughed again. She glanced at the clock.

"Yes, I have something to say to you, and I must say it quickly. I have come"—she hesitated a moment and then chose her words with a studied indirectness—"have come to a conclusion; and I fancy that one does not reach a decision of the kind I have just arrived at altogether upon a sudden impulse. It must necessarily have been developing slowly in the mind until it finally attained maturity, otherwise one would scarcely be prepared to recognize it as a full-grown thing when confronted by it. I am able to do more: I am willing both to recognize it—and to welcome it."

"And this in plain language—?" he inquired, gravely, meeting her eyes with a valor that refused to shrink beneath their scorn.

"This in plain language is simply a way of telling you that I have made a mistake and wish our engagement to be at an end."

He stood silent, thoroughly himself at last, but unable to speak a word.

Once more she glanced at the clock. "I leave for Washington to-night," she continued, outlining her program with a complete collectedness. "I shall visit friends there for—I cannot possibly say how long. Already the life here seems to have slipped away from me, and I can picture myself as emerging from the past and in my

proper environment. The idea is quite exhilarating. But I must hurry, hurry; I have a number of purchases to make, and I hope to get into town before the shops close. By the way, it may interest you to know that I shall have this evening as traveling companions Mr. Ascot and his sister."

Despite her assurance of the necessity of haste, she still lingered. She stood looking down upon the dead embers on the hearth, and a smile slowly chased itself over her cold, sphinx-like features.

"Not a gleam, not a gleam flickers, you see," she said, with a sweeping, mocking glance into his face, and a low, derisive ripple of laughter.

Then, without another word or look she turned, and in an instant she was gone.

CHAPTER V

THE POWER OF THE VISION

FOR a short time after she had left him there was a sound of hurrying footsteps through the house. Servants, peremptorily summoned, moved past the doorway, dashing wildly to and fro in the excitement incident to the hasty departure of a very important member of the household whose will was the pivot around which their daily domestic action revolved.

Now and then, from the neighborhood of her dressing-room not far away, Caroline's voice, calm, concise, rose in low but penetrating tones above the general confusion, while, with the skill of one trained successfully to command, she proceeded to give her orders with such effect that, in less than ten minutes, the entire machinery of the place was in motion and alive to the exigency of a wholly unexpected event.

Presently the noises began gradually to subside. Caroline's servants, accustomed to obey promptly and with little of the usual questioning and wide-eyed wonder peculiar to the darkey when suddenly called upon to perform a surprising task, were executing her instructions with incredible swiftness, Penelope alone, the specially privileged, breaking forth from time to time into a series of pious ejaculations that slightly interrupted the general preparation and voiced the dumbfounded amazement of the rest.

At length the final act in the small drama of departure

was at hand. Several dusky figures flitted rapidly through the hall and down the stairway carrying wraps and traveling-bag and umbrella. A trunk was rolled by. Then there came the sound of a car beneath the window, a light, energetic footfall past the library, followed by Penelope's heavier tread, a few murmured words of direction relating to other luggage later to be sent—and Caroline was gone, gone with the abruptness and that peculiar suggestion of finality which frequently marks the exit of the artful, and which in her own case merely revealed a culmination whereby the natural shrewdness and decision of her character met its extreme test.

Throughout the entire time Geoffrey, unperceived, hearing the movement in the house and realizing it only as one hears and realizes in a dream, had remained still and stricken in the little room. Not once had he thought of leaving it. The great numbness of mind and body which possessed him had rendered him oblivious of everything that required action, and he had passed beyond the plane of conscious thought. For a moment after the interview between himself and the woman who had played so momentous, albeit a minor, part in the tragedy of his existence had come to an end, he had stood motionless in the center of the room. Then, all at once he wheeled, and like one intoxicated by some deadly drug he had staggered over to the table and sat down beside it. With a wild gesture he flung out his arms and bowed his head upon them.

The despair in that instant depicted upon the young face had finally frozen into an aspect of indescribable hardness, and the look of his whole form in its splendid, defeated strength was like that of a dying gladiator slowly and bitterly surrendering his life. Once, as soon as the sound of the motor on the gravel road had become

indistinct, he roused himself slightly, and again from the first word to the last he read the portion of the letter which had come so strangely, and yet so surely, into his hands.

For several moments he held it before him, studying every character that the beloved hand had traced, still too absorbed and desperate to realize the moral infringement or the indelicacy of the act, too crazed by the maddening revelation it gave to feel himself bound by any ordinary human restriction. Already the experience with Caroline had been reduced to the dimensions of a mere episode. All life had suddenly receded from him, leaving in the whole realm of existence only two—himself and the being whom he felt that through countless æons of time he had been slowly traveling towards, whom through all eternity he believed that he should know, the being whose soul had answered to his soul as flame responds to flame, and whose face held for him all the divine rapture of the loveliest of created things.

But suddenly, and with returning violence, the despair, the torture, racked him. The letter in his trembling hands slipped and fluttered to the floor. Again his head fell forward on his arms, and his frame shook and writhed under the force of the tremendous feeling which swayed him as only the simple, powerful nature is swayed under the stress of stark, overwhelming emotion.

He was still sitting thus when there came the sound of familiar footsteps on the stairs. There was a brief, intolerable space in which there was uncertainty whither the footsteps tended; and he waited, breathing heavily like one startled out of sleep. He raised his head. An instant afterward Evelyn stood on the threshold.

She had returned to the house after her ordeal in the gardener's cottage, and she entered in all unconsciousness,

evidently upon some trifling errand, before proceeding to her own apartments for the purpose of removing her damp outdoor garments. Something of the same rapt, beautiful expression that he had noted but a short time before when he beheld her kneeling beside the little dead child and giving herself up in infinite tenderness to the hard task before her—a task that purified and ennobled by its humble, God-like service, and its all-embracing compassion—still lingered upon her features. But midway in the room she paused, and a look of awe at sight of his suffering came into her eyes.

For a moment she stood quite still, and the color slowly retreated from her face, leaving her of a pallor that equaled his own. He had risen, and they faced each other in silence, aware through some awful inward prompting that it was their ultimate moment, and hushed by the magnitude of its meaning beyond speech. Then some instinct made her turn and softly close the door behind her.

He did not advance nor stir, and she came a step or two towards him, her gaze fixed dumbly, in beseeching wonder on his face. But he gave her no assistance; and, helpless, she glanced about her for some clew, some explanation. A sense of being sternly and imperiously summoned before the bar of a human soul pierced her, and as her eyes once more returned to him they faltered and fell. As they did so she caught sight for the first time of the closely-written sheet at his feet, with its strangely intimate suggestion.

Following her glance, he stooped and picked it up. For an instant he held it in his hand, but his eyes never left her face. He was terrible in his silence and in the solemnity of his passion. Then he handed her the sheet.

She took it into her hands, and her gaze, bent eagerly upon it, grew tense. Suddenly a low cry broke from her,

and she recoiled, faint and staggering. He sprang toward her, but she waved him back.

"Tell me, tell me in Heaven's name, how this came into your possession?" she gasped.

He was close at her side, and his face was utterly reckless.

"What does it matter?" he whispered. "At last—I know."

She drew back from him in a kind of horror.

"If you have read what was never meant for your eyes—"

He silenced her by a sudden, vise-like grip upon both her wrists. His voice had in it a ring of mastery not to be denied.

"The knowledge which it gives is *mine*," he said, "mine by the right of Eternal Justice, mine through the favor of the Spirit of Truth! You drove me to the verge of perdition, you cannot now deny me that poor boon."

The death-like pallor upon her countenance deepened. Her lips moved, trembled, but uttered no word. She flinched slightly under the pain of his hold upon her, and he released her.

"I have sounded the depths of all that a man may suffer—and live," he continued, "but now"—once more the desperate light returned to his eyes, and his face as he bent over her wore the look of a madman—"now—I know! For this, if for this only, I shall bless her forever."

"Her?" she asked, faintly.

He laughed sardonically.

"Mrs. Delafield. It was she who gave it to me. Through some accident it found its way into this—this volume which she unearthed from the bookshelves there. Of course you thought you had destroyed it, but you

see—you didn't." He picked up the copy of "Psyche" on the table and held it before her eyes. "It was a curious trick of fortune, wasn't it, that the book should have been—this?"

She bowed her head, the explanation of everything flashing into her mind just as it had done into his and Caroline's.

His bloodshot eyes searched her face with a look of inquiry.

"Will it interest you to know that she has broken her engagement to me? She has said good-by to Kentucky—and to me," he added, grimly. "A few moments ago she left the house. To-night she will be on her way to Washington."

A sudden illumination swept over her features and transformed them. She turned her face away. Then God had heard! This was the first, the very first round of the steep ladder he had yet to climb. The letter, a mere instrument, was but a minor aid in the direction of the miracle of spiritual healing which all the forces of her being had been striving to accomplish through selfless prayer, and the mystic power of suggested thought as communicated by the working of those dimly comprehended laws that govern human existence. She turned toward him with a strange, new calm upon her.

"Yes, it interests me—it greatly interests me," she said, in a very low voice.

"You are glad?"

"I am glad. You were unfitted for each other. With her I could scarcely dare to hope that your life would ever become the beautiful, gracious thing I dreamed that it might be."

"Even yet?" he asked, abruptly and bitterly.

Her face once more was illumined, and it was uplifted as if in prayer.

"Even yet," she answered, with grave conviction, and with a great humility.

He turned away with the old turbulent rebellion. He picked up a small pearl paper-knife from the table and studied it.

"With you I might have realized the heights," he said, "the very summit of the 'hills of dream.' Nothing seemed too large, too difficult. I felt a giant in my strength—my strength which came to me all through you. All the fair promises of a lifetime were centered in you. You were the inspirer of my every higher thought, the awakener of my every noble dream, the alpha and the omega—the beginning and the end. I saw you in every perfect thing, and the very God I worshiped spoke to me through you, for I glorified you beyond all creatures of the earth. To me you were not of earth—but of Heaven, for beauty divine and imperishable rested upon you." He paused a moment, and then went on, flinging the paper-knife carelessly from him. "Love with most men may be a thing apart, the passion of an hour, with me it was the very essence of life itself, not merely its crowning joy, but the thing itself. Even my art, like my religion, was so built upon it that the very foundations of it also gave way—when you failed me."

The sudden quick heaving of her breast was all that told how the distinctly human side of her had been touched by his words. But it was only for an instant. With the firm grasp upon herself which she had slowly gained there had come a look so spiritual, so exalted, that she appeared all at once to be surrounded by an atmosphere of such purity as to remove her to a realm where she

might speak to him as if beyond the power of the senses either to arouse or to ensnare. She looked at him strangely, with eyes that seemed to penetrate the veil of flesh, and as spirit might look on spirit. And thus gazing, the profound womanliness to which she had attained, the old, all-embracing sense of motherhood which is at the root of the nature of most good women, and which had sprung up in her in the presence of his great need, cried out in pity and yearned above him with a love of which she knew she need not be ashamed.

"Geoffrey, will you sit down there and let me talk to you for a little while?" she asked, in a voice that bewildered him by its sweetness—and its infinite remoteness.

He silently obeyed her, and as he took a chair beside the hearth she walked over to the mantel. For a moment she stood looking down thoughtfully upon the fireless bits of partially burned coals and heaps of cinders, then she looked toward him, and smiled gravely, yet reassuringly.

"See, it has quite gone out," she said, in a tone that sounded direct and natural despite its hidden purport. "We must rekindle it. There are some pine cones here."

She knelt down before the hearth, and he sprang to help her, while she busied herself as if bent only upon the simple process.

"Now, a match!" she commanded. "There!"

As the flames leaped up, suddenly Caroline's parting words returned to him. The symbolism of the dead coals flashed into his mind anew, and he turned a startled look upon her. She rose from her knees and took the chair opposite him—the one which had been Caroline's. Dazed and wondering, he beheld the readjustment of the picture with its great and overwhelming transformation: the quiet, restful room, the firelight leaping on the hearth, the lovely woman, sitting with folded hands in the very

seat where but recently Caroline's taunting presence had dominated a scene fixed by the power of an everlasting contrast in his thoughts. But there was no possible mistaking her meaning. He waited for her to speak.

She was so still, so silent, so lonely in the profound isolation with which she had enwrapped herself, that something held him mute also, despite the surge of rebellious feeling which rushed upon him with an intensity to provoke forgetfulness of the stern restrictions of honor upon them both.

"There is so much, so much that I wish to say to you," she began, at length, with her eyes still on the fire. "I feel that I can say it now, at last, for it is as if I had died and God had let me come back for a brief moment to ask your forgiveness. I have died—died to everything, I trust, that is to stand between me and that larger life which I am trying to live, and through which I hope to make atonement to you—and to him."

His voice smote her like a blow.

"Can there be atonement for—some things?" he asked, harshly.

She collected herself with an effort.

"It has all slowly, slowly come to me—the meaning of things," she said, presently, "and I—I think I understand. Can you not see how—how a person's largest usefulness might be reached only after he has traveled through dark waters of sorrow and of sin? And how there is a spiritual helpfulness that one might give—and a sacrificial service—when self has once been crucified, that otherwise he might have been wholly unequal to?" Suddenly she flung out her arms and they fell to her side with a gesture of such profound and sacred feeling that his eyes were riveted upon her in a dumb and waiting inquiry.

"You mean—"

Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Oh, Geoffrey, I have prayed—I am praying for your soul!"

He shook his head in deep bitterness of spirit, while something like a groan struggled to his lips. He turned his face away from her, and the action smote her like a sword thrust by its simple, boyish helplessness.

"Don't!" he cried irritably, and with an effort to hide the tremor in his voice. Then he flung out harshly, "It is too late—everything is—too late! Don't try to persuade yourself that you can do anything for me—now."

For a moment she struggled silently with herself.

"If we are to speak of these things we shall have to go back to a time long ago, oh, so long ago, down there in the mountains of North Carolina."

His voice sounded stern and inflexible.

"If you mean to begin at the beginning you will have to go back to a time long before that—long before the night you dropped an orchid from your hair at the feet of a dreaming boy—long before his first dawning sense of beauty, and of life and love—back into the region of the Unknown—back into the realm of the Infinite."

That his words moved her profoundly was evident by the sudden, swift glow which overspread her features, making her for an instant the vivid, resplendent being of other days, throbbing with life and hope and joy. But immediately afterward she paled until her face was like marble.

"We must go back to the time of—the Vision," she said, in a tone that removed her at once beyond the plane of the human, and gave to her aspect that peculiar look of spiritual domination which already he had noted. Yet something stirred in him that made it difficult for

him to accept the basis she had set up for them. He glanced at her quickly, and then, with a slow, prolonged gaze, his eyes again riveted themselves upon her.

"You have called it—that?" he asked, huskily.

"I have called it that," she answered. Her lids were lowered, but all at once she raised them and looked him gravely in the face, with frank, luminous eyes.

"Geoffrey, it was a real thing, a divine thing," she declared, softly, yet positively—"a vision not only of a great human love but of all the fine things of the spirit—a revelation meant to work an apotheosis. The relation of each of us toward the God who made us was at stake in the loyalty which each should show to it. Both of us failed. I—in the way you know, and you in the way you have never acknowledged to yourself."

Stung and startled, he cried out in passionate denial, "It was only that *you* failed *me*!" His hand on the round of his chair trembled violently. His whole frame was quivering as beneath an unexpected blow.

"It was not only that I failed you—it was also that you failed yourself."

The solemn earnestness of the words struck him dumb. He stirred uneasily. But she went on, and with gentle but unsparing directness.

"It cannot be said with entire truthfulness that my sin has been the cause of your temporary spiritual overthrow. Thank God, that I can believe it is only temporary!" She broke off devoutly, and then hurriedly began again, as if eager to speak the accusation struggling up in her for utterance, and to be done with it. "It was the apparent cause, but not the inevitable one. I can see that now—but could not at first. The downfall of each sprang from some flaw or special weakness in his own nature; so that each, yielding to a lack of faith, be-

came involved in tragic complications which worked to a logical end."

"Our destiny," he responded, doggedly, turning his eyes away from her and setting his teeth hard.

She dissented quietly. "The trouble which came upon us was not destiny. It was law—that eternal, unchangeable manifestation of the Divine working in human affairs."

Something in her words, uttered with the profound conviction of a soul that has stood awed and humbled in the presence of august things, pierced him to the very heart's center. He bowed his head in silence. As he sat pondering upon her meaning, a stupendous change, crushing, yet inspiring, seemed taking place within himself. Whereas, in the past, he had seen himself like a puppet in the hands of fate, impeded by conditions not of his own making and borne on to an unalterable end, he now, as by a vivid lightning flash, beheld himself in an altogether different light, and saw that through his own weakness, his own failure to brush aside these impediments in his way and press forward in the adverse current, his failure had come.

Thus there was beginning to come to him a sense of exhilaration, of new life. Fate makes a man an unequal contestant. But law gives him a fighting chance—a sense of the possibilities of life and constrains him to feel that, if overthrown, his failure has come of deliberate choice, or his deliberate yielding. Caroline's appeal had been directed mainly to his intellect, Evelyn's was to both mind and spirit. Yet with him the process of up-building could not be otherwise than slow. Conscious at last that he had played but a weakling's part in the great battle, shifting the blame, he realized only too clearly that he had still a weary waste to travel before he could

reach the heights—those far-off, lonely peaks which had once called so loudly to his young heart.

All at once he turned to her in abasement, yet not without a note of the old acrimony.

“Have you, in your orisons, included anything so specific as a remedy for a shattered life?”

She looked up quickly, and again one of the slow, radiant, transforming smiles of other days flashed over her features. She spoke gently, as to a little child—a little suffering child. “Geoffrey, it is in duty—in simple, self-forgetting service that peace is found. It sounds old and trite, but it is true, true, true!”

“Then you have found it?” he asked, coldly.

“I have found it,” she said, with a certain proud reserve.

“And I?” he inquired, as his eyes moodily sought the fire.

She quoted softly some lines from one of his fellow-poets.

“‘The man

Who serves his brother-man is he who lives
His life with nature, takes deep hold on truth
And trusts in God.’

“Geoffrey, in your reconsecration to your art, I see in the future before you such great and glorious things!” Her face shone. “All that you have ever thought to accomplish is already on the way. You will learn to ‘live the poetry you sing.’ You will breathe into your work a message so sublime and beautiful, so tender, that men and women of all nations will pause to listen, to be comforted, to be inspired by its secret power—a power that comes from God! And all the old sorrow of the past, all the bitterness and the rebellion of spirit, will fall away

from you like an unsightly garment, leaving you once more the brave, true spirit who long ago dedicated himself to a noble work. You will fight, and you will conquer, and God Himself will deliver to you the crown—jeweled with the tears of the tried but yet victorious, garlanded with the bloom of the flower of love, which, through you, has sprung up in the hearts of the aged—and of little children.”

He heard her, with pulses tingling at her prophetic words, swept on by the quivering earnestness which throbbed in her speech and illuminated her face, but still unable to make real to himself all with which she had striven to arouse his benumbed and lacerated spirit. Suddenly he rose.

“I should like to believe that some day I shall justify your faith in me,” he said, very humbly. “Gods knows, I never meant to fling back at Him the gift He gave. But the future still looks very dark to me. Time only can reveal. In the meantime—I shall begin again.” His voice broke, and then grew steady with his final words.

“Thank God!” she murmured, low under her breath.

“And thank you,” he responded, with simple fervor. “To-morrow I shall leave for New York. And then—the fight!”

Her face paled a little. “To New York?” she asked, in sharp surprise.

He looked at her strangely, and suddenly his features hardened.

“Do you think that I can stay here—here in sight of your face, in sound of your voice—now?”

Her hand involuntarily clutched the folded sheet of letter paper which she had slipped inside her belt. She also had risen, and for a moment’s space each looked into the other’s eyes.

"Yes," she said, at length, steadily, "I think you could—if there were need of it—I think you could—do—even that."

"It is well I am not tested," he replied, shortly. And then, without another word he turned abruptly and strode with long, quick strides across the room.

She followed him quietly, but of a deadly pallor. Just as they reached the door there was a sound of muffled negro voices outside.

"Gawd, is dey done ring dat 'phone ag'in? I dunno whar he is. Mebbe he done gone wid Miss Ca'line. I dunno. Lemme go fin' Miss Evelyn."

Evelyn opened the door, and Penelope burst forth, "Honey, de cun'l done fall down in a fit or somethin', an' Miss Maria gone plum' 'stracted, an' dey can't fin' Mr. Geoffrey nowhar!"

Geoffrey passed quickly out into the hall, and Evelyn, silencing by a wave of the hand the volley of words which was ready to follow from the two excited domestics had they been allowed the smallest excuse for so doing, turned to him and spoke in low hurried tones.

"Shall I go with you?" she asked.

He denied her gravely and firmly. "Mrs. Douglas is expected to-day to take Maria home. She is doubtless already with her daughter—or soon will be."

"But if—if I should be needed?" she persisted. "In that case you will let me come?"

He met her eyes for the briefest possible instant.

"In that case I will let you come," he said, and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

THE PASSING OF COLONEL DOUGLAS

BUT though his need was sore, Geoffrey did not send for her. His will, strong and inflexible as had been that of the old colonel himself—who now lay on the borderland of life and death, solemnly awaiting his final summons—refused to waver, despite the longing at times well-nigh overmastering to break through his resolve never again to see her until he too could reach the heights from which her braver spirit called. Yet during the days of anxiety and grief which followed, her presence, beautiful, exalted, purified from all earthly dross, and breathing upon him a divine and womanly compassion, was so near, so actual, that the inward vision which brought her before him made her far more real than she could have appeared had it been possible for him to behold her through the medium of mere bodily sense.

The strain of the following weeks upon him was long and hard. Colonel Douglas's illness, due to an apoplectic stroke that was but the culmination of a condition of ill-health unsuspected by those about him, seemed likely to prove fatal, despite the fact that in twenty-four hours after his seizure he had rallied and returned to a temporary consciousness. The strange old man, grimly taciturn with respect to everything that immediately concerned himself, and ever ready with a cynic's sneer at reference to his own or another's mortality, had so well guarded the secret of his waning strength that even Geof-

frey's loving and observant eyes had failed to see in the gaunt form and stern visage, each daily growing gaunter and sterner, signs of a dissolution that to him was to mean the severing of his closest tie of blood, and that to the colonel was to bring neither consternation nor regret. For death could have no terrors where life had long withheld all joys.

However, that Geoffrey's very real sorrow had touched him as he had not been appealed to during many lonely years was evidenced by the fact that when he had apparently slowly come out of the attack and been pronounced by his physicians in a fair way to recover, he had steadfastly, and almost religiously one might say, refrained from quoting any of the favorite passages, which now with dry ironic humor flashed with special application into his thoughts. Not once had he given expression to his actual state of mind. Not once did he mention Schopenhauer. Instead, with the docility of a child, he submitted to all the efforts put forth for his relief, his knotty old countenance unrevealing of the deep inward glee with which he recognized their wholly unavailing attempt as a mere prolongation, while he awaited the inevitable signal which would soon enable him to doff his cap and make his final salute to a world that he was by no means loth to leave.

Nevertheless, for several days those in attendance upon him were hopeful. Then there came a relapse. Once more he sank into an unconsciousness from which only with difficulty he could be aroused; and in this condition he lingered.

On an afternoon in early February, Evelyn, who previously, out of respect for Geoffrey's wishes, had hesitated to do more than to come daily to inquire or to bring a handful of flowers, entered for the first time the dim,

silent old house. At the door the servant who answered her ring informed her that both Miss Douglas and her mother were resting, and that Mr. Baylor had driven into the town upon some necessary business. Also, that only one of the trained nurses was in attendance, the other being completely broken down.

For an instant Evelyn hesitated. Then a sudden awe fell upon her as an immediate resolution took root. In her hand she carried a white rose—a bride-rose, as it chanced to be, the flower having been selected without realization at the moment of its particular species. She glanced down at it, and all at once its secret suggestion as applied to the desolate, dying old man smote her with an infinite tenderness.

"I had meant to ask that this be placed on his pillow, but I believe I should like myself to put it beside him, if I may," she said, softly. "Ask the nurse to let me speak to her."

A moment afterward a door on the left opened and a round-faced, sturdy-looking young woman, moving with the noiseless step of her calling, appeared in the hall, yawning a little as she approached.

Evelyn came impulsively forward. "You are so tired. Please let me take your place for a little while," she asked, at once, persuasively. "I am Mrs. Merriweather—the neighbor just across the way—and I count myself one of the colonel's friends."

The young woman stood a moment, gazing with undisguised admiration at the gracious and elegant figure in the long fur coat—the power of a personality winning and at the same time uncomprehended making its old fascinating appeal to the generous heart of youth. She considered, but with evident doubt of the other's efficiency.

Evelyn divined her reluctance. A sad radiance flitted across her features and disappeared.

"I have had much experience as a nurse," she put in, quickly. "Besides, I shall see that you are summoned immediately if there should be the smallest need. Really," she took a step nearer, "you should let me. I fear that soon you will all be broken down."

Something in the low, thrilling voice, abetted by a compelling desire for a brief respite, made the nurse give way. Smiling, she assented at last, and passing out further into the wide space she tripped lightly past and made her way up the spiral stair.

Evelyn stood quite still in the center of the great hall. Then she slowly turned and with bowed head entered the room on the left.

It was a large, square room, with massive old-fashioned furniture and a high, carved mantel—a man's room, scrupulously neat, yet lacking in all the small appurtenances which lend an air of grace and color. Despite the fire sputtering behind the tall brass andirons the place seemed as cold and cheerless as it was bare; so that the great four-post bed on which the lean form was outstretched dominated like a sarcophagus in an otherwise empty vault.

Evelyn had softly closed the door behind her, and for an instant she stood with quickly beating heart, conscious of the involuntary shrinking with which life and health draw back in the near presence of death and decay. Then she crossed the room with imperceptible tread and stood looking thoughtfully down upon the worn countenance athwart which a pale gleam of February sunlight played as on a bit of jagged rock. There was a chair near the bedside, and presently she took it, first placing the rose on his pillow. Here, with aching heart, Geoffrey

must have sat for hours, she knew, and as the thought of the peculiar bond which united these two—a bond closer than the tie of blood which existed between them—swept over her, a great tenderness for the proud, lonely old man, for whom long ago life had been made bitter by a woman, shook her and filled her eyes with tears, tears that were not all for him, but in part for that other one, equally proud and lonely, for whose salvation all the strength of her being was lending itself in constant supplication.

As once more remorse held her in its grip, she thought of old Mrs. Madison and wondered vaguely how a type merry and irresponsible as a frolicsome child should have been able to deal a blow so deadly that for more than fifty years the wound had never healed. But it was not she, it was Woman, she reflected, and the hurt had been the immemorial one, in the guilt of which all share who in any degree have stooped to faithlessness or deceit. How the colonel would have spurned her also, if he had known! The thought lacerated and cut her in her inmost nature like the cruel twisting of a dull-edged blade in tender flesh. Yet, by the right of a profound sympathy and gentleness of feeling, she could not but believe herself privileged to be there; and bringing her offering in all humility of spirit, she sought by the simple act dumbly and reverently to heal where another woman had only torn—thus, unconsciously, symbolizing that larger womanhood, before which Geoffrey in awe and wonder had just bowed, but which for the colonel, dying, deserted, and desolate, had never even existed.

Presently, into the midst of her solemn meditation, a quaint Dutch clock on the mantel of elaborate and curious workmanship loudly sounded the hour, and the colonel stirred. She rose quickly and bent over him. He

opened his eyes and gazed at her—long and steadily—in one of those keen and penetrating looks that seemed to pierce to the very soul.

"Ha! so it is you!" he said, at length, in a voice that sounded strangely natural. "I thought it was the other one."

"The other one?" asked Evelyn, startled and confused. She was breathing quickly from the shock he had given her, and her eyes were wide and questioning, but her face was very pitiful as it bent over him.

"That impudent, self-seeking jade, Caroline Merriweather Delafield," replied the colonel, promptly, the near presence of death by no means subduing him to a more flattering choice of epithet than ordinarily he was wont to bestow.

"She is very far from here," said Evelyn, soothingly, as she smoothed his pillows. Then, seeking to divert him, she held up the rose she had brought. "This bloomed to-day for you," she murmured, softly.

The colonel's eyes rested for an instant upon it. His face darkened. "Humph! A bride-rose!" he muttered. "Long ago—long ago—" All at once he broke off. He lay silent for a little while, and the old clock ticked loudly. But presently he looked hard again at Evelyn, his thought once more returning from the past to the woman who was the present destroyer of his peace. "Very far from here, you say, hein? How far is that? Just across the road? Further than a man's two legs can carry him? Speak!"

"Caroline is in Washington," responded Evelyn, very quietly. "She left here on the day you were taken ill."

The colonel chuckled with diabolical glee, his merriment adding a strange ghastliness to his death-stricken countenance.

"How long," he demanded, feebly, at length, exhausted by the effort, "is she expected to be absent from these parts?"

Evelyn hesitated, fearful of the effect upon him of the communication she was about to make. Then she boldly took the plunge.

"She is to be gone indefinitely," she said. "A telegram yesterday announced to us her marriage to Mr. Ascot."

The colonel half-raised himself, and then sank back on his pillow. His eyes were glittering, and his voice rose and broke, hollow, yet triumphant.

"The Lord be praised!" he exclaimed, loudly. "He has delivered him from the snare of the fowler and the noisome pestilence!"

The words, uttered with a devoutness of which few would have believed him capable, the colonel being generally regarded as a scoffer, notwithstanding the fact that he was a thorough believer in the tenets of the Christian religion, seemed to drain from him the last drop of remaining strength. He lay for a long time so quiet and still that one might almost have concluded that life had departed. But the colonel was only gathering himself together for his last mighty effort.

All at once he turned upon Evelyn with surprising vigor. He was ready.

"Telephone to the law offices of my friends Barry and Bledsoe, and say that Colonel Douglas desires the immediate attendance of one or both of them at his bedside," he commanded in his imperious, stately fashion.

"Oh, but you must not excite yourself so—you will make yourself worse, much worse," protested Evelyn, horrified by the desperate effort he was putting forth, and fearful of its consequences.

The colonel turned upon her with wild, fiery eyes.

"Madam," he cried, fiercely, "would you deny the last request of a dying man? Do as I bid you at once. There is a proviso in my will that need not now meet the eyes of that poor boy, since the shift which I was compelled to resort to for his safety has served its purpose. My estate must be left to him unconditionally. Command my lawyers at once."

Evelyn moved quickly across the room to the telephone. Presently she put up the receiver, having delivered her message in a tone too low for the colonel to hear in his great bed some yards away. When she returned to him, he searched her face in curious inquiry.

"You explained that the case was urgent?" he demanded, anxiously.

"Very urgent," she replied, gently. "In less than fifteen minutes Mr. Bledsoe will be with you."

For the next quarter of an hour he did not speak, but sank back into the lethargic state, broken by an intermittent restlessness, in which he had lain for many days.

When the lawyer, a tall, dark, middle-aged man of very courtly bearing and a pleasant twinkle in his quiet, yet shrewdly thoughtful eyes, arrived, Evelyn herself anticipated his ring at the door bell.

"Will you walk right in, please—I—I think there is very little time," she said, in low, hurried tones, waiving even the preliminary of any introduction or explanation of herself in her sense of the urgency of the situation. "There are writing materials," she added, "on the table near his bedside."

The man bowed, understanding at once. "Thank you, Mrs. Merriweather," he replied, giving her the brief, sweeping glance of one skilled in the art of measurement of his fellow being. "However, I came prepared."

As he passed quickly on into the colonel's room,

Evelyn, still standing just outside the doorway in the wide hall, turned and came face to face with Maria Douglas. The girl's astonishment, notwithstanding the gravity of the moment, was almost comic.

"I heard only a moment ago that *you* were here—and now *this!*" She pointed in the direction of the door through which but an instant before a tall dark figure in a long overcoat had disappeared.

Evelyn put out an arm and drew the slim form to her. "I knew you must all be so very tired, and the nurse let me take her place for a little while," she whispered, appealingly. She gave an uneasy glance around.

Maria Douglas's brows were knit in bewildered disturbance. Her eyes were fixed in painful inquiry upon the tightly closed door of the colonel's bedroom. What secret machination was taking place within those four walls? she asked herself, in consternation. All at once she turned abruptly. "Let us go into the den," she suggested; "we can't very well talk here."

She led the way into a tiny room across the hall. "I fixed this up as a sort of resting place for Geoffrey when he is tired or bored—which happens rather frequently, the bored part, that is. Take the Turkish lounge, and I shall deposit myself upon this lowly seat at your feet. Now! And if you have mercifully any desire to rescue me from incipient lunacy you will tell me as speedily as possible what on earth Mr. Bledsoe is doing here—since you yourself opened the door for him."

"It seemed better not to let him ring," murmured Evelyn, apologetically.

"Yes—yes—but what is he here *for?*" insisted the girl, her brows puzzling again. "Did Cousin Marshall make you telephone to him?"

"Yes."

"Is it something about his will?"

"Yes."

Maria Douglas sat wrapped in painful thought. Presently she heaved a deep sigh.

"Then, poor, poor Geoffrey!" she exclaimed, under her breath. "Not that he ever really made any calculations based on Cousin Marshall's money. I am quite sure of that."

Evelyn's face was secure and free from fear. "Why do you think that—that anything—dreadful is about to happen?" she asked, softly.

The girl's face wore a look inexpressibly droll and helpless for an instant. "Because I have always feared it—at the last. He is so queer, so dictatorial, and I have always dreaded a clash between his will and Geoffrey's. They are, after all, a good deal alike."

"But why—now?"

Maria shook her head, and once more the comical look flitted across her features. "One never knows what to expect of Cousin Marshall," she said, raising her arms and letting them fall limply to her side. "He has such—such a terrible sense of humor!"

Evelyn adjusted the pillows at her back a trifle more comfortably.

"I feel sure that you need have no uneasiness," she said, after a moment, with averted eyes.

"Oh, it's more than likely that I am wronging him, the poor old dear, by my horrid, suspicious thoughts," admitted Maria, in a burst of penitence. "He is kind—kinder than most persons know." Her eyes filled with tears. "Did I ever tell you that he once gave me five thousand dollars? They were getting me off to school, and there was considerable difficulty about the wherewithal to accomplish it, Cousin Marshall came forward most

handsomely. He said that he had always intended to leave me that amount in his will, and he saw no reason for giving me a cause for special rejoicing over his death, so he decided to forestall my mortuary happiness. Of course, recently every one has supposed that his entire estate is to go to Geoffrey. There has been only one obstacle in the way—Mrs. Delafield.”

“Happily, that obstacle has now been removed,” said Evelyn, with her gaze still on the window.

“Yes—I know,” replied Maria, “but unfortunately Cousin Marshall doesn’t also know.”

“He knows, because I have just told him. He had been dreaming, and he mistook me at first for her.”

Maria stared. “Oh—I see,” she answered, wonderingly. And then, in a tone of sudden comprehension, “So Geoffrey was in some sort of danger, after all! A woman’s instincts are usually to be depended upon. How lovely that you should have been the one to bring the glad good news to him, since you are the only woman I ever heard Cousin Marshall mention for whom he has had invariably a kind word. Do you know we knew nothing of it until to-day at luncheon? Of course we have not been reading the papers. But mother drove into town for a few moments this morning, and some one told her. She mentioned the fact of Mrs. Delafield’s marriage quite casually at the table. Geoffrey never flinched. Would you believe it? I honestly think he is—relieved! But he has been like that since the day she left. Notwithstanding his grief about Cousin Marshall, he has seemed like a new being to me. I can’t quite describe the change in him. It is so subtle. Mrs. Delafield seemed to build a sort of prison about his soul, so that it was impossible for it to soar. But now—well, he’s different, and I only

wish Cousin Marshall could live to see what I believe he is going some day to accomplish. He looks so—powerful, and sometimes his face is positively radiant. As he sits beside Cousin Marshall's bed his eyes are so full of pity, so divinely kind. He makes one feel that he is looking on poor frail humanity with an almost God-like understanding and compassion—just as a poet should."

The words, spoken simply and without the smallest hint of romantic feeling, offered an appeal by which Evelyn was stirred to the very utmost. Under the effect of it her whole being seemed to put forth bloom like a flower in the sunlight. She could not speak for a moment, but her voice was low and exquisite when she found it again—an outward expression of a profound thankfulness and a depth of sacred emotion, unsuspected by the young girl at her feet.

Presently Maria stifled a little yawn, breaking into a wan and half-indignant smile at her involuntary acknowledgment of a fatigue to which her loyal spirit was loth to confess, and quite suddenly Evelyn put forth both her arms and drew the lithe form up to a seat at her side.

With great tenderness she bent above the sleepy girl. "Dear, how good you are!" she exclaimed, softly, "and how—how beautiful!"

Maria opened wide her eyes in blank amazement. Then, comprehending that it was not a strange obtuseness toward her very evident physical lack but a spontaneous tribute to certain spiritual qualities with which Evelyn was disposed to endow her, she snuggled up more closely; and thus with locked arms the two were sitting when the lawyer appeared in the doorway.

"The colonel would like to have your signatures as witnesses," he said, in a prompt, business fashion that,

however, failed to overshadow the man's very pronounced Southern courtesy. "May I ask you to be so good as to step into his room?"

A few moments later Evelyn once more was sitting alone by the colonel's bedside, Maria somewhat reluctantly having yielded to insistence and gone for a brief and much needed rest. The house was very still. Only the occasional sound of a carefully muffled footfall through the rooms broke a silence that was solemn and oppressive, as if Death with stately steppings were on the point of entering the abode, which seemed dominated in every chamber by an air of waiting, of august expectation. Now and then the faint rumbling of a vehicle on the roadside, or the neighing of a horse in some distant pasture, broke oddly upon the senses, summoning them to things without, yet with an acute shrinking from the incongruity of all common daily happenings.

Presently the Dutch clock on the mantel sounded the hour of five—slowly, ominously, like an actual menace. But this time the colonel did not stir. Evelyn rose and bent over him. He was quiet and apparently sleeping, his whimsical, gnarled old countenance peaceful as a little child's. The look of fleeting and defeated tenderness which to her kind and thoughtful eyes had from the first made its touching appeal seemed to have given way to the very extreme of the thing itself, so that she was scarcely prepared for the change she saw in him: the softening and subduing of all his sterner qualities.

Her tears gathered and fell softly, and after a moment, retaining the look of him in her thoughts as something infinitely delicate and rare and sacred, she moved across the room and stood for a long time looking out of the window—upon the rolling sweep of bluegrass, already

showing a vivid green, and upon the riot of white and purple crocuses, the colonel's favorite flower, peeping shyly up in the sod beneath his windows. For the coming of spring, and at full floodtide, was very near at hand: the old divine rapture of life renewed, of love resplendent, triumphant, burgeoning in bud and flower and flaming wing; in the sweet chant of running water flowing blithely to its lover, the sea; in the low music of sprouting grain at the call of the passionate sun—in all the wide realm of nature, in all the deep heart of man.

All at once, too absorbed in her sympathetic meditation to allow a personal introspection to intrude even for an instant, Evelyn turned and looked toward the lean form on the bed, from whom not the least of life's withholdings seemed that of the approaching glory of newly created things, which was surely to be denied him. Then, inexpressibly startled, something made her fearfully cross the intervening space, and move round to the place where she had been sitting.

With quickly beating heart she bent over him. A painful trembling seized her limbs. And suddenly she sank down on her knees beside the bed.

A moment afterward the door opened and closed softly. Without raising her head she knew that the man's step approaching was Geoffrey's, and that in a single glance he also understood.

A low sharp cry escaped him, and he came hurriedly forward. But in an instant the great Calm which pervaded the room like an actual presence seemed to lay its hold upon him too, and he sank to his knees beside her.

Neither spoke. How long they knelt together there, awed by the majesty of death and united for a little space by the common bond which links humanity, neither knew. But when they rose at last, brought simultaneously to a

consciousness of the immediate, something that each was able to appropriate as a personal benediction still lingered with the stark, outstretched form, so lonely and so sad, yet lying patient and at peace at last—and with the white rose upon his pillow.

CHAPTER VII

WAR AND PEACE

It was nearly a year and a half later, and a cool, brilliant afternoon in early summer—the summer of nineteen hundred and sixteen.

To Alfred Merriweather, who, from the beginning, had followed with a most fevered interest the great European conflict, the sudden climax in his own land growing out of the Mexican situation had come with a shock, tremendous, startling, and tragically personal.

The rebellious longing for the life of the soldier, pathetic in view of his own frailty, had become with him an obsession against which Evelyn and Dr. Beverley strove in vain. And when finally war with Mexico seemed to be imminent and the entire National Guard of the country was ordered out, the hourly excitement under which he lived threatened to overthrow his feeble strength and to reduce him to that state of complete invalidism which Evelyn long had feared, and from which, thus far, her strong will and unceasing care had mercifully saved him.

But in the great issues now before the country they were at variance. Evelyn, being an ardent advocate of peace—while Alfred was an extremist in all that made for preparedness, or war—had been forced to abandon almost any semblance of argument with him, dreading the effect upon his health; and it was therefore with much concern that she found him on this particular afternoon sitting in his rolling chair on an upper gallery with a big

pile of newspapers on the table at his elbow and one spread out before him. She put forth a quick, beseeching hand as she sat down beside him.

"Don't, Alfred, don't read them any more!" she cried, a note as tenderly protecting sounding in her voice as if she were speaking to a sick child. "You know Dr. Beverley said—"

But Alfred cut in sharply,

"Beverley be hanged! What on earth are you two thinking of? Do you expect me to sit here like a doddering old woman, neither knowing nor caring about anything? It is simply monstrous. Let me ask you not to hide the papers from me any more."

Evelyn glanced quickly at him, surprised into a blank silence by the absence of his customary courtesy. Then, noting his flushed face, she quickly reached for a volume on the table.

"But it is all so terrible, so unnerving, this continual thought of war. Let me read to you—something here."

Alfred leaned forward and grasped her fiercely by the wrist.

"Evelyn," he said, in a strange low voice, "the Kentucky troops leave for Fort Thomas on Saturday!"

"Yes, yes, I know," she responded, hastily.

A sense of fearful tension, revealed in his taut countenance and his hot clutch upon her wrist, caused her half to rise to her feet, but he pulled her down to him.

"I—I was once the captain of Company I," he muttered, hoarsely, in her ear. "And now!" He glanced down at his helpless form, and bit his lip, while tears sprang into his eyes. He dashed them off with an impatient hand. "And to think—to think that there has been so poor a response to the call for men! Why, I can hardly believe it. If any one had told me that Ken-

tucky—Kentucky of all states in the Union—would be backward at a time like this I'd—I'd have struck him in the face!"

Evelyn readjusted his pillows.

"Don't be too hard on Kentucky. It has been like that, and much worse than that, elsewhere, you must remember."

"Well, it's rotten, wherever it's been."

A sudden gleam of mischief shone in Evelyn's eyes.

"Lexington had a big preparedness parade not long ago. I heard there were ten thousand people in it. I wonder how many of them have enlisted."

Alfred shrugged. "Not one, according to Beverley—if he knows anything."

"I rather think he knows," Evelyn replied, playfully, hoping to keep the conversation as far as possible away from the personal. "He has made it his business to inquire. He is writing an article, he has just told me over the telephone, to inspire enlistment, that he proposes to issue broadcast. The main idea, I believe, is that individuals should stand ready to back up their opinions by personal sacrifice. In other words, if they have talked for preparedness, or war, now is the time to go themselves, and send their sons, and give their money—now, when the country is calling so loudly for men to complete the units of the National Guard."

Alfred's eyes gleamed. "By George," he cried, "I'm glad he is going to do that! It's like old Beverley," he chuckled, gleefully. "His blow is always straight from the shoulder."

"I asked him," Evelyn continued, relieved at seeing a quieter look come over the strained face, and the quivering of the long slim hands grow less spasmodic, "I asked him what effect the sudden, dramatic call to the colors

had had on the preparedness people, and he snorted and said, 'Oh, they still want to be prepared, but they prefer to let the other fellow do the preparing.'"

"And he's right—he's just precisely right," exclaimed Alfred, hotly.

"I suggested that paraders are not always patriots, and that the persons who shout loudest for war are seldom the ones who go to war," said Evelyn.

"Well, it looks as if all that's left to us is a race of mollicoddles. Men are either too selfish to fight or too cowardly to fight, and that's about all there is to it. We might as well face the truth."

Evelyn gave a swift, involuntary glance at the poor maimed form. "There will be others," she said, with slow sad conviction. "It brings the tears to the eyes to think how many others there will be—men of the purest and noblest motive—who will answer the summons promptly, ready to give their strong young bodies as sacrifices to this Moloch which has been set up as a god in our midst."

"Let us hope you are right about it," responded Alfred, gravely. "If not—then we'll have to apply the remedy."

"And the remedy?" she inquired, humoring him.

"The remedy? The remedy is War—and universal military service. That's what will make men. This country has had a life of ease too long. War will bring to the front the red-blooded men who will put to shame this present weakness. And by Jove, if I don't believe we're going to have it, too! See here—"

He reached for one of the papers on the table, but Evelyn quickly and firmly removed it from his grasp.

"We mustn't talk any more about these things to-day. It isn't good for you, it really isn't, Alfred dear."

He leaned back in his invalid chair and sat looking thoughtfully off into the distance.

"Evelyn," he said, at length, "I simply can't understand you, I just can't. *How on earth* you can hold the views you do! Great Heavens, where would this country have been if those old Revolutionary ancestors of yours and mine had thought as you do? There certainly weren't"—he laughed, grimly—"there certainly weren't any weak and womanish pacifists among them!"

Evelyn's cool and steady hand closed gently over his hot and throbbing one.

"You poor dear boy—you are so, so tired!" she exclaimed.

For a moment he was silent, then something made her add, quickly, "Sometime—sometime when you are feeling very much stronger and better—maybe I can make you understand how it is that war has come to mean to me a madness, an inconceivable madness. You see, dear—just briefly and finally—I hold that there is a higher patriotism than that you are dreaming of, a patriotism that presupposes the Fatherhood of God and the universal Brotherhood of Man. That is why I am not willing to accept the code of courage of the streets, or, in higher spheres, the mailed fist, the doctrine of Force against the principles of Christianity."

He turned and looked at her long and steadily.

"I wonder—I wonder if there can actually be anything in what you say?"

She rose and stood over him looking down very tenderly upon him, and a smile, indulgent, beautiful in its sudden flash, illuminated her face.

"Yes, there is something—everything in it," she said. "Now, it is time for your afternoon nap."

Then, yielding to a swift impulse, she leaned down and her lips lightly touched his brow.

"Go to sleep—and dream—of peace," she whispered, softly, and was gone.

Maria Douglas—to whose fanciful thought Alfred Merriweather's picturesque old habitation had ever furnished for its châtelaine a particularly appropriate setting, somber, yet gracious—paused before the great stone gateway and heaved a sigh of relief at sight of the inviting coolness made by the deep, wide shadows beyond. She had made her way on foot from the electric car, the bubbling overflow of life and joy within her making her at times oblivious of everything save the delightful intelligence she was in haste to communicate. Her gown was of a greenish shade of tan, a selection that is apt to be the instinctive choice of persons of her pale, dull-colored hair and complexion, but her small straw hat was chic and becoming, and her whole aspect was so blithesome, so freshly gay, that today one might have been easily tempted to call her pretty.

She opened the gate and moved briskly along the winding avenue. Now and then the full-throated note of a song-bird, rapturous, delicious, called from the thick branches. The air was odorous with a thousand shy, sweet perfumes. The whole earth seemed singing a pæan of life and love. And the heart of the girl, alive to it all, in tune with it all, and under the spell of that mighty transport which means a renewal no less real and marvelous than that manifest in nature itself, was breathing in a divine content that recognized its cup of happiness to be full.

On reaching the house she avoided the main entrance, and made her way around to the side of the building.

Nearby under a great spreading elm there were a rustic bench, a table, and several chairs; and here, at this hour, one might, in fine weather, expect to find Evelyn, while Alfred, in his invalid chair on the upper gallery, took his afternoon nap.

To-day Maria found her here, as she had expected, a bit of embroidery in her hand, and a book open on the table beside her.

"I have come to tell you—" she was beginning, when Evelyn, rising, broke in with a ripple of sympathetic laughter.

"But you have told me already," she whispered, putting her arm about the girl and drawing her down to the rustic bench.

Maria stared innocently. "Really, I couldn't," she said. "I only knew myself last night."

"One look into your face is sufficient," responded Evelyn, throwing her whole soul into the girl's happiness and thus sharing it with that sense of large enjoyment reserved for all those who are capable of sinking self in the presence of another's bliss. "You are as full of joy as the roses which bloomed to-day. Didn't you know that they are all your little sisters?"

Maria reflected. "I don't know just how full of joy a rose may be, but oh, it certainly is glorious to be as happy as I am! I didn't think that Rob and I could be married for years and years. He is just recently out of the Harvard law school, and the only prospect ahead is to come through his uncle, Mr. Bledsoe—that, and of course his own good efforts. I met him while I was at Dana Hall. He is a Kentuckian, and his last name is Underwood. I forgot that I hadn't told you any of these things. But we have only been engaged for a few weeks—since he came here from Boston. I have been wanting

to tell you—you first of all—but somehow I just couldn't. Some impulse made me tell Geoffrey when writing to him. It is always so much easier to tell things in a letter; you can get pink all over and there is no one to see. Then, he is so far away, he is always so grateful for every meager bit of news."

Evelyn paled a little, and she did not speak. But she waited, smiling, her eyes still on the girl's face.

"He is just a *dear!*" exclaimed Maria, hurrying on in her breathless fashion. "What do you think he wrote back to me—all in that quiet, masterful way of his that calmly takes hold of a question, considers it, and then disposes of it in a manner that is apt to be final. He wishes Rob and me to take up our abode at the old place, to have it in as complete possession as if it were actually our own; and to be served in any way we may desire by all of Cousin Marshall's old retainers, whose name, you know, is legion, and whom Geoffrey insists that as a matter of sentiment he wishes to keep in his employ. Doesn't it sound too idyllic for anything—lovely as a fairy tale? He says we are to raise all sorts of things and make heaps of money for ourselves; and we are to have everything indefinitely, because he doesn't expect ever to be there again. He says that he loves the old place too much for Cousin Marshall's sake to see it go to rack, and that he will consider that we have obliged him greatly if Rob and I will move in as speedily as possible after we are married. Geoffrey is *such* a gentleman. It is so like him to try to make us feel that to accept his generosity is simply on our part an act of accommodation."

Evelyn's face was still eager, attentive, kind, expressive of a sympathy big enough and broad enough to allow no reminder of her own blighted happiness to intrude in that moment of her friend's ecstatic outpouring of irrepressible

joy. But for an instant the thought of Geoffrey, banished because of her; of his marred and lonely life robbed of all the simple, sacred emotion which good men long for: its fireside peace, its sweet daily and nightly intercourse, its benign blessedness that comes from a sense of link with humanity, rushed upon her and well-nigh overwhelmed her.

"I am so glad," she said, presently, her eyes wandering away to hide her tears to a rose-bush nodding in the sunlight as the light breeze passed over it, "so truly, truly glad! It is—it is a happiness that comes but once, and only to a few. But I always knew that you were one of the elect," she added, with a playful smile.

Maria Douglas made a comical little *moue* and shrugged her shoulders gayly.

"Did you?" she asked, eagerly. "What a pity you did not tell me; you might have spared me all sorts of nervous horrors. The truth is, I always knew that I was born for domesticity, but I rather feared it was going to elude me," she supplemented, drolly, a sort of instinctive shielding of her inmost nature making her all at once resort to something like flippancy.

Evelyn understood at once and fell into the lighter tone.

"I know how much you love the country," she said, "and I can quite picture you in a sunbonnet and gingham gown, imagining yourself the genuine rustic housewife, with your garden, and your chickens, and, most delightful of all—your pigs."

"I shall have dozens and dozens of them," replied Maria, with gleeful promptness. "We may find them our most faithful allies when clients are scarce." Presently her face grew grave. "I couldn't sleep at all last night after Rob had left me. It wasn't all of ourselves I was

thinking. Of course one does grow horribly selfish in the presence of the—Great Event. But again and again my thoughts kept turning to Geoffrey and that wonderful letter he sent me. You have heard, haven't you, that he has gone to the Border?"

Evelyn paled. For an instant she could not speak. She turned quickly away.

"I—I did not know," she said, gravely.

"Oh, yes, he is an officer in one of the New York regiments. Geoffrey has not been for war. The fact is, he is distinctly for peace. He believes that life should be constructive, and not destructive, that a man should spend himself, not as a destroyer, but as an upbuilder—a peaceful worker in the world's great vineyard. He thinks that if the vast sums which will have to be expended on a possible war with Mexico should be applied to educating the people there, to assisting them to work out their own salvation, they might be made a free, Christian nation. But since there are not enough people who think as he thinks—that is, if there are, they are not organized, and without organization nothing can be done—he wants to play a man's part, and so—he is at the Border," she broke off, suddenly. "And here am I, trying to tell you something of Geoffrey's ideas in my own audacious way. But he has the biggest, sanest view on the present subject of any one I know, and thoughts of what he wrote keep coming back to me. Really, it was altogether a wonderful letter."

Evelyn's eyes were downcast. "It was so—kind?" she asked, in a very low voice, while her breath came quickly and with a tumultuousness that was almost painful.

"Kind? Oh, yes—that. But I didn't mean just generous and thoughtful and all that. I was thinking of

a quite personal note, and about himself. There was something so large, so noble, so *splendid* in it—and yet, under it all, a deep, deep sadness. But he was brave, magnificently brave, and one knew that there must be great things in store for him, because of his spirit of courage, and of faith, and of supreme consecration. I never before read anything from him just like it, and I didn't know which I wanted to do most—to cry, or to shout for joy."

Evelyn turned away, and her face was suddenly transfigured. She did not reply for a moment, and when she found words at last her voice was hushed like that of one speaking in a sanctuary.

"I thank you—I thank you very much for telling me," she said.

Maria hurried on. "You know I have never been able to rid myself of a fixed idea about Geoffrey. I have always believed that some time in his life—years ago, perhaps—he was hurled from a great height into a depth of despair and misery so awful that it very nearly meant a complete wreckage. I have no doubt that the trouble came to him by way of love of a woman, and I think now, I am quite sure, in fact, that he will never marry. But however it may be, somehow, through some new impulse and inspiration, he has come up out of the darkness; and he is surely stronger and bigger and better than ever before, and one does respect him so."

After a moment she added, "You know his new drama is about to appear. The papers have been full of it, and Geoffrey is a very important person indeed these days. I believe I have a little scrap here, and then I really must be going."

She reached in the pocket of her coat and drew forth a brief newspaper clipping the contents of which she

read aloud: "Eminent critics who have read the advance sheets of Mr. Geoffrey Baylor's forthcoming work—a modern metrical version of the old classic legend of Tristram and Iseult—pronounce it a literary achievement of ability so marked as to place it distinctly in the realm of genius, alongside, if not beyond, the great masterpieces of the past in which the theme lives immortal.'"

Evelyn held out her hand. "Will you give that to me, please—unless you care to keep it?"

Maria rose. "Oh, dear, no. I mean I don't care to keep it, and of course you may have it. And now I really must say good-bye. My trousseau isn't even begun, and I have a lot of shopping to do before nightfall." She gathered up her parasol. "Now I'm off—good-bye—and don't be surprised if you don't see me any more until I become your nearest neighbor."

Evelyn rose, and suddenly with a swift, impulsive gesture she reached forth both her arms and drew the girl tenderly to her.

"Do you know what your name ought to be?" she asked. And then, with a dual significance unsuspected by the girl, for whom, with the self-absorption of the supremely happy, the entire universe was existing for the sole purpose of contributing to her own felicity, Evelyn added, softly, "Evangeline, they should have called you. Evangeline, which means, Bringing glad news."

For several moments after the slim form of Maria Douglas had disappeared from view, Evelyn sat with quiet, luminous eyes looking off into the distance, her hands clasped in her lap, her face rapt and very still. The fear which for an instant had gripped her heart with thought of danger to Geoffrey in his new and hitherto unexpected sphere of action had vanished. Strong and

militant, the vision of him rose before her now, and she saw him, superb in his young manhood, battling sternly against all that might defile, his spirit undaunted and undismayed, while he moved, calm and untroubled, in the midst of flame.

But up what a steep and lonely pathway each had climbed during the year and a half which had passed since the death of the old colonel and the departure of Geoffrey from Kentucky! Her face seemed to alter strangely as she sat thinking. The old wild impassioned beauty, with its eager insistence upon the wine of life, its hint of things obscure and hidden coupled with the suggestion of a marvelous kinship with joy—its look of "tragical loveliness"—remained, it is true, but there seemed at the moment an added grace: the power of self-mastery, the fine pure air of the mountain height, the peace of the infinite surrender.

All at once she rose and looked toward the gallery. Alfred was still sleeping, it seemed. But a cool little breeze had begun to stir, and her expression grew anxious. He must not have a chill. And thus without any sense of jar or confusion, but rather with a welcoming recognition of the work before her, she obeyed the summons back to duty and the loving task which was hers.

She moved quickly across the lawn and entered the house. A moment afterward she was on the gallery and at his side. She bent over him and touched him gently on the arm.

"It is after five, dear, and you won't sleep well to-night if—"

All at once she drew back and stood perfectly motionless, while she grew marble white.

He was lying with his face toward the setting sun, the

departing rays of which fell benignly upon him. Beautiful he was in the majesty of death, and in the "rapture of repose" which held him.

For all the perplexity, the passion, and the pain had vanished from the face so recently marred with rebellious doubt and suffering; and as she stood looking down upon him, profoundly shaken, Evelyn knew that somewhere—somewhere beyond the discord of the "earth noises" and the confusion of the problems which had so harassed and distressed him—somewhere, in a region of Light and Truth, he had found Peace and everlasting rest to his soul.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPOILS OF THE STRONG

Mrs. CHISHOLM laid aside her knitting, rubbed her eyes, blinded a little by the brilliant North Carolina sunshine flooding the room, and turned at the entrance of Drusie with the morning mail.

"To think it is late November!" she exclaimed, absently, to herself.

Drusie grinned. "Ain' you nuver got used to feelin' warm at dis time o' de yeah?" she asked, peering into her mistress's face with a mischievous twinkle in her rolling black orbs that was expressive of the very opposite of the familiarity it might suggest.

Mrs. Chisholm fumbled among the letters and papers on the tray. "Well, I certainly ought to be used to it, after all the years I have lived here, but it is indeed a surprise, a delightful surprise, to me always. What is this?—oh, a package for Miss Evelyn. Take it to her at once, Drusie. And, by the way, where is she? That poor child spends far too much time alone. I must—"

But Evelyn, very tall and slim in her black gown and tight little hat, with its loose floating veil, cut short the mention of all intended interference in her behalf by entering noiselessly.

"I am going into Hendersonville, Aunt Harriet," she said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Mrs. Chisholm puckered her brow and thought for a moment.

"Are you walking or driving?"

"Oh, walking. I have seldom seen such a day."

"And almost the last of November?" assented Mrs. Chisholm, with a quaint little nod of the head. "I was just remarking upon the weather to Drusie, who, I must say, is rather obtuse to all such things. Christmas will be right on us before we know it. I don't want to be a nuisance, my dear, but could you attend to a few errands for me while you are in town? I really must begin on my boxes for the soldiers. I shall send a number of fruit cakes, as well as other things."

"To the European soldiers, do you mean?" asked Evelyn, suppressing a smile, and making a pretense of misunderstanding for the mere satisfaction of receiving the emphatic denial she well knew she would call forth.

"Indeed, no. Not that my heart is not aching for those poor dear suffering ones also. But I am thinking at this time of our own young men on the Mexican Border—brave, splendid young fellows, doubtless, very many of them—down there enduring the sand storms and the tedium of camp life, and, I dare say, just as eager to eat their Christmas turkey at their own firesides as the noisy stay-at-homes who sent them there. I am convinced that it has meant in many cases a very heroic sacrifice, although their manliness has refused to make a fuss about it. I have decided to send three large boxes to young friends of mine from different parts of the country who are there."

Evelyn walked over to the window and stood slowly drawing on her gloves.

"My relatives, the Chisholms," her great-aunt continued, "are becoming uneasy about Arthur. He is in one of the New York companies, you understand. It seems they have heard nothing from him for ten days, or more.

He had previously not been well. They fear pneumonia."

Evelyn turned. "Has there been much—much pneumonia on the Border?" she asked, quickly.

Mrs. Chisholm's keen eyes noted the sudden flare of interest, the slightly tremulous note in the low voice. Evelyn's face during the five months which had passed had altered strangely. There had come both a physical and a spiritual gain that was as startling as it was transcendent, and that at certain moments had forced itself upon the inner consciousness of the little old lady (who adored her) in a bewildering confusion.

"Child, how beautiful you are!" she exclaimed, softly, ignoring Evelyn's inquiry. Sighing, she turned aside, and as she did so her eyes fell upon a small neatly-done-up package lying in the midst of several letters on the table where Drusie had placed it. "Oh, here is something for you—just came to-day. I had almost forgotten it. A book, I suppose, from the look of it," and she handed out the package.

At first sight of the handwriting and the postmark Evelyn's heart seemed for a full moment to stop and then to go on again with a sudden rush that blinded her. For she knew at once that the volume in the brown paper wrapper was Geoffrey's, and that he had sent it himself from El Paso, and not more formally through a publisher. It was the one communication, save a few brief words at the first, which had come to her from him since Alfred's death.

In silence she received it, waited a moment for Mrs. Chisholm's final directions, and quietly, with no hint of the inner turmoil which was urging her frantically out into the open spaces, left the room.

But once out of sight of the house she moved rapidly down the path, her footsteps hastening on to a favorite

secluded spot, where she might feel safe from all intrusion.

She sat down on a rustic bench well hidden behind a clump of spruce and pine, and untied the cord. She held the book for a moment reverently in her hands—Geoffrey's book, that was to lay bare the inner workings of his soul, together with the revelation of the solid basis upon which the immortal part of him, after intolerable doubt and disturbance, had at last found rest. Gently she touched the leaves of the slender volume in gray and silver—his version of the ancient classic story—and once more sat gazing at it, longing, yet hesitating to begin to read, eager, and in breathless suspense.

Lyonness!—that fabled land of romance—Cornwall! The very names breathed poetry. And still dreaming, still reluctant, she beheld the two deathless figures of Tristram and Iseult, the type and the symbol of a great mastering human love, slowly rise out of the mist and the shadows, and again their story gripped her and held her by its imperishable beauty and its deep inner meaning. Then, suddenly, her heart grew faint with fear, while thought of the four immortal versions, that of Tennyson, of Wagner, of Arnold, and of Swinburne, rushed upon her, menacing her with their greatness.

How would Geoffrey treat his large theme? All at once a wild, feverish haste possessed her. She opened the volume and began to read.

It was less than an hour later when she closed the book at last. She was quivering in every nerve—profoundly stirred under the spell of his great effort and the rapture of thankfulness which possessed her.

For it was truly a victory of the loftiest order. Not only did it appear that a notable achievement in literature

had been accomplished, but more, far more, sang in the impassioned drama which would ever represent to her the spoils of the strong. It was the reconsecration of a soul, the mastery of life over death, the winning of eternity as the goal, through the ancient miracle of Love. It was the triumph of the Vision.

Henceforth, existence for him, as for her, was to be a thing idealized, made beautiful by service. And bravely, joyfully, now, each would go forward as to the music of a great symphony—the symphony of Life.

As if already the sound of it were in her ears, she laid the book gently in her lap, clasped her hands over it, and sat in the attitude of one listening, her face tranquil, uplifted, and filled with a divine loveliness.

And thus it was that he found her.

The stalwart figure in uniform had approached noiselessly, and it was not until the young officer saluted and stood at attention before her that she realized it actually was Geoffrey. Then she rose.

For a moment there was absolute silence. Geoffrey's face, pale beneath its coat of tan, was tense, almost stern under his effort at self-mastery. All at once he seemed to realize that he had startled her cruelly.

"I—I saw you there," he stammered, speaking with a rapidity that made his words almost unintelligible, "I was taking the short cut through. I am here on a few days' leave. I—I came to bring Chisholm back to his people. He has been ill—typhoid pneumonia—"

Suddenly he broke off, took a step toward her, and stretched out both his arms.

"Oh, Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn!" he cried.

For an instant's space, as if the years which had separated them still held her under their icy spell, she hesitated. Then, all at once, like a rose bursting into

bloom beneath a tropic sun, the past slipped from her, and she was the Evelyn of old, the Evelyn of his brief courtship, the Evelyn of his dreams.

As the swift crimson rushed from throat to brow, her voice, eerie, haunting, throbbing with all the wild, poetic emotion of other days, yet holding an added depth and sweetness, broke softly upon his ear, and she walked straight into his arms.

"Yes, Geoffrey, I'm coming," she said.

THE END.

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all













